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*The Laughing Academy: A Comparative Analysis of Academic Satires*

by David John Reddall

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in

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## **Examining Committee**

**Professor Massimo Verdicchio**  
**Committee Chair and Examiner**  
**Comparative Literature/MLCS**  
**University of Alberta**

**Professor Jonathan Hart**  
**Comparative Literature/English and Film Studies**  
**University of Alberta**  
**Supervisor**

**Professor Irene Sywenky**  
**Comparative Literature/MLCS**  
**University of Alberta**

**Professor Francis Landy**  
**Religious Studies/History and Classics**  
**University of Alberta**

**Professor David Miall**  
**English and Film Studies**  
**University of Alberta**

**Professor Kenneth Womack**  
**English Department, Penn State Altoona**  
**Reader**





## Abstract

In the course of this study I undertake an etiological analysis of the origins of academic satire in Aristophanes' ancient drama *Clouds* and then proceed methodically through a comparative treatment of a myriad of texts that spring from the same source, both historical and contemporary. The project is designed not only to freshly elucidate and explicate academic satires from a comparative perspective but also to demonstrate that works that belong under this aegis have two vital powers: to diagnose and offer remedies to the manifold foibles and follies that afflict the academy and its denizens.

I have divided the project into the following constituent elements: following an introductory discussion of the combination of the satirical mode and various genres that treat of the academy, I then treat of the academy itself in a chapter entitled *The Thinkery*, then analyze a representative set of texts in which students are most prominently featured (this portion of the project is entitled, for painfully obvious reasons, *Students*) and then focus my critical, comparative attention on texts with members of the professoriate as their nuclei (*Teachers*). To close, I discuss the *Lessons* that can be harvested from works of academic satire and make an argument for the power of these works to conjure both caustic criticism of, and compassion for, academics and the small world they inhabit.





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### *Dedication*

“But if you expect support for your fortunes from anywhere else, and, in that hope, are filling your pages of yellow parchment—quick, Telesinus, go and obtain some kindling wood, and then present your poetic creations to Venus’ husband, or close your books and lay them aside for the tunneling worm.”

--Juvenal, *Satire VII: The Plight of Intellectuals*

Rome’s bitter, brilliant wit implies in these lines that only Caesar can save the writer (the scholar or the poet) from ruin. Happily, while it is true that I have been sustained in part by the largesse of the state in the course of this endeavor, I have had support from many others.

First and foremost, my Mother and Father, who have suffered hardship for the sake of my studies and yet remain convinced that these pages, and their peculiar son, ought not to be consigned to Vulcan’s furnace. My Father taught me that teaching and learning combine to form the best of lives. My Mother’s kindness, generosity, compassion and love of narrative fiction in all of its forms made the question concerning what I might be best suited to learning about and teaching **academic** in the pejorative sense.





Professor Jonathan Hart literally preserved this project (and its author!) from the hungry worm. Janey Kennedy and Barb Heagle in the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies managed to navigate through a bureaucratic labyrinth on my behalf and kept my spirits up when things seemed grim. Too often, those who make a program or department hum with quiet efficiency are neglected by those who pass through it, intent on their own goals. This project would never have come to fruition without them.

Professor Don Carmichael has been a constant, magnanimous friend to me. Conversations with him about the extraordinary pleasures and perils of teaching have nourished and sustained this project and its author. We have mused together about the possibility that the sage of Stagira was right when he averred that all men desire to know, with the proviso that they also desire to *be* known, i.e., to be understood. Don has helped me to understand and given me the extraordinary gift of being understood. He loves both wisdom and teaching and has deepened my devotion to both.

Marian and Laurie Allen have been extraordinarily generous and supportive friends. Laurie is a fantastic, mischievous wit and another individual who knows how wonderful reading and teaching literature can be; all of those descriptions apply to Marian as well. It ought to be said of her, too, that she understands the difference between a talented lecturer and an excellent teacher, which I failed to grasp before I was fortunate enough to encounter her. Like others mentioned here, she believed in me, both as a scholar and a teacher, at times when I had profound doubts. She is firm



and uncompromising but she is also one of the kindest, most understanding human beings I have had the privilege to know.

Mr. Randall Benson, a splendid friend and ambitious pioneer in the field of green energy through his company, *Off the Grid*, rescued me from many a pit of despond. Randall is a devoted father to his daughter, Kali—should she ever require a tutor when studying satire, I will be very pleased to serve.

Professor Paul Clarke, of Indiana State University, has been a source of moral and material support of extraordinary generosity. It seems only yesterday that he and I were undergraduates, enjoying a pint and mocking academe in the hallowed halls of Brock University. Professor Clarke is an extremely accomplished academic satirist, though his efforts have been revealed to me alone. Perhaps, in time, we can collaborate on a project that would fit into the confines of this one.

Finally and I hope, fittingly, this project is dedicated to those who have inculcated the love of learning and helped me to savor and share it: my teachers and my students. Some of the latter merit inclusion in the former category!





### *Introduction*

“Must I be always a listener only, never hit back...it’s hard *not* to write satire.”

--Juvenal, *Satire I: Why Write Satire?*

It will undoubtedly strike the reader as odd to confess this at the outset, but this project is unfinished and will probably remain so for so long as academic satires continue to be written. Trying to come to grips with a specific corpus of satirical writing and to explain its nature and implications is not an easy task, particularly when the works in question continue to multiply rapidly and seem at first glance to be so polymorphous in their profundity and perversity. In the words of Leonard Feinberg, “Satire is such an amorphous genre that no two scholars define it in the same words” (18). In point of fact, I would quarrel with the very idea that satire is a *genre* in the strictest sense.

Indeed, I am convinced that William Elford Rogers has made an extremely convincing case for the assertion that the concept of a genre needs a more robust theoretical treatment than it received prior to the advent of his work. Rogers' whole effort in *The Three Genres and the Interpretation of Lyric* appears to be directed toward the sustenance of genre concepts as viable elements of critical and interpretive discourse. While he may appear at first blush to be playing fast and loose with Kantian transcendental metaphysics, such that genre concepts might be understood to be the conditions for the possible existence of literary works in the



same way that the categories of the understanding constitute the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience, Rogers is actually interested in explaining the role that concepts play in underwriting the existence of interpretations, not the works themselves. He explains:

Let me put this specifically in terms of literary genre. If, as I assume, literary genres can be interpretive models, it must be, by the very nature of understanding, that the understanding of the work and the understanding of its genre are mutually constitutive; that is, we understand the work by understanding the genre, and we understand the genre by understanding the work. To interpret the work in terms of the genre concept will necessarily constitute an interpretation of the genre concept itself (20).

This suggestion has a leading role in Rogers' theory of genre and in his analysis of the genre of lyric in particular. It has obvious utility where my endeavor is concerned, because his allegiance to the hallowed trinity of epic, lyric and dramatic genres respectively leaves satire not outside but free to play within each of them and their contemporary equivalents as a way of writing rather than a distinct genre unto itself. The reflexive, reciprocal relation between mind and world, genre and work--what we are seeking in the work and what we always already understand it to be--is the halo that encircles all of Rogers' ratiocination about the mode of interpretation that leads us to gather works together under genre concepts.



In laying the groundwork for his argument concerning the mind of the work, Rogers has recourse to the works of Dilthey—upon whom I will have occasion to call later, in the context of my analysis of Tarrt's *The Secret History*. He (Rogers) points out that, "Dilthey's theory of *Weltanschauungen* seems a particularly good illustration of how Kant's relational categories, even though not explicitly acknowledged here by Dilthey, can ground a model of the stances the human mind can assume toward its world" (51). One such stance that is linked to the genre concepts by Rogers is, "*Objective Idealism*, finally, [which] is closely associated with the attitude of aesthetic contemplation... the attitude of Objective Idealism has as its model the relation of reciprocity or community between the mind and the world. One is reminded of Santayana's dictum that beauty is pleasure perceived as a quality of the object" (52). This dictum requires some elucidation, particularly given the central importance of this reciprocal mind-world relationship for Rogers' theory. What the assertion that "pleasure [is] perceived as a quality of the object" appears to imply for Rogers is that the world becomes the mirror of the mind and vice versa. More precisely, I have the sensation of pleasure within me, but I also find that the object that provokes that response seems to be imbued with the quality of pleasure itself. I find in the object what I find in myself thanks to the presence of the object. My subjective state appears at once and yet in importantly different ways to blossom within my mind and yet stretch out from the world to enfold my mind within it. The mind of the work, then, entails a similar sort of melding of my subjective world with the fictional world





created by the author to create understanding, i.e., the world the author reveals is animated by my mind and I contribute to its integrity as I read 'with' the author. As for the world of the work, Rogers enlists Gadamer's aid in an attempt to explain this concept. He argues that:

Gadamer implicitly compares understanding a text to understanding a foreign language. In the process of learning the language we must adopt the view of the world implicit within it; and that world turns out to be a different world from our own, though we do not therefore give up our own world [*Don Quixote* notwithstanding, of course]. Thus, quite clearly, the mind and the world of the work, in the sense in which I want to use the terms, are mutually dependent. To say that *Hamlet* makes fun of Polonius is to imply that the world of the play is one in which the springs and forces of human action are dark and mysterious to men like Polonius. Conversely, to say that the world of *Hamlet* is dark and grim is to imply something about the inferred stance of the mind of the work toward human experience (55).

Despite the characteristic terrors of the neologism, or more properly, the fresh concept, this does not seem like an awfully odd pair of ideas. Rogers summarizes his discussion by putting his position concerning the mind and world of the work in terms of two questions: "'What is the work (author) saying?' and 'How does the work (author) say it?'" (55). Said questions pertain to the mind and world of the work



respectively, but it ought to be borne in mind that the two are always reciprocally constitutive of one another. For the purposes of the present project, I wish to assert that academic satires unfold within the confines of a range of literary genres, the most frequently resorted to being the novel. Satire ought to be understood, I would argue, to be a *mode* that is one of the means of making the mind and world of the work, which are also dependent upon our interpretive understanding for the very possibility of their existing as such, manifest before the reader. Thus it is quite feasible to assert that while Voltaire's *Candide*<sup>1</sup> is by no means a work of academic satire through and through, it nevertheless contains a character—Professor Pangloss—and a number of episodes within the larger bounds of itself that are consistent, in terms of both manner and matter, with the works of David Lodge, Philip Roth and Francine Prose: novelists who have produced works entirely given over to the aim of conjuring the world of academe and satirizing its vices and follies.

For example, when Pangloss, in the throes of an excruciating case of syphilis, proclaims to Candide, in response to the latter's compassion and horror at his miserable state:

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<sup>1</sup> I would argue that Deidre Dawson's "In Search of the Real Pangloss: The Correspondence of Voltaire with the Duchess of Saxe-Gotha," makes a very compelling case for the hypothesis that the Duchess herself served as a model for Pangloss. Dawson avers: "...a careful comparison of her correspondence with certain passages of *Candide*, particularly those in which Candide or Pangloss are speaking, reveals striking similarities in attitude and in tone. In this sense one can discern a certain persona of a "one-eyed" philosopher emerging through Louisa Dorothea's letters. Likewise the sarcastic reflections uttered by Martin the pessimist in his efforts to disillusion Candide seem to echo remarks made by Voltaire in his effort to open the duchess' eyes to the philosophical implications of the horrible events [the Lisbon earthquake foremost among them] occurring all over Europe"(97). Dawson's careful treatment of the Duchess' association with Leibniz and Wolff fortifies her argument.





“Not at all,” replied the great man; “it was a thing unavoidable, a necessary ingredient in the best of worlds; for if Columbus had not caught in an island in America this disease, which is evidently opposite to the great end of nature, we should have had neither chocolate nor cochineal. It is also to be observed that, even to the present time, in this continent of ours, this malady, like our religious controversies, has been confined to us. The Turks, the Indians, the Persians, the Chinese, the Siamese, and the Japanese are entirely unacquainted with it; but there is a sufficient reason for them to know it in a few centuries. In the meantime it is creating prodigious havoc among us, especially in those armies composed of well-disciplined hirelings, who determine the fate of nations; for we may safely affirm that, when an army of 30,000 fights another equal in number, there are about 20,000 of them so diseased on each side”(Voltaire, *Candide*, 23).

As I indicated above, this is one of myriad instances in which Pangloss espouses a wildly enthusiastic version of the optimism that Leibniz and his disciple Wolff were so aggressively spreading about Germany and France when Voltaire published *Candide* in January, 1759.<sup>2</sup> The avalanche of atrocities that is heaped on the pivotal

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<sup>2</sup> It is a commonplace of *Candide* interpretation that Leibnizian optimism is its chief target as satire. To wit: “Voltaire wrote *Candide* as an objection to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's theory that God created the universe as the best of all universes, or worlds. He mocked Leibniz using the character Pangloss, a philosopher who teaches an optimistic philosophy that is the antithesis of the world Voltaire creates around Candide, through violence and mayhem. Pangloss's "best of all worlds" view, though, is accepted by the naïve Candide” (Papadimos). What is most delightful and useful about Voltaire's satirical *modus operandi* is that he has used the diction and tone of a convinced devotee of Leibniz—*pace* Dawson in the antecedent note—juxtaposed against episodes of mounting monstrosity to make



characters in this text, while Pangloss cheerfully affirms his optimism—through an oral cavity ravaged by syphilis, an auto-de-fé and innumerable other affronts and assaults—bludgeons the reader with the idea that this is far from being the best of worlds, even according to the more modest implications of Leibniz’ original arguments in his *Theodicy*<sup>3</sup>. *Candide* is a powerful attack, not simply upon those who would digest and then transmit such ideas—scholars, pedants and doctors of “metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology”(12)—but the very ideas themselves and their profound discord with the world as ordinary experience reveals it. While this by no means amounts to a vindication of pessimism, it should help to chart the gulf between academic satire as such and the strand of it that conspicuously winds through *Candide*. It also shows that the satirical *modus operandi* is oriented toward the juxtaposition of extremes for the sake of implicitly advocating a middle way, a third term between utopia and dystopia. Following the ostensible Eden of Thunder-ten-tronckh (11) and the chaos and calamity of Lisbon in the midst of a disastrous earthquake (26) lies the pragmatic admonition, “that we must cultivate our

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the hollow foolishness of the theory painfully clear. This element of *Candide* may be said then to be academic satire *par excellence*, albeit nested within a brief novel with a much wider sphere of concerns. The whole of the world and those in it, whether quaking in Lisbon or playing childish games with sapphires in El Dorado, is Voltaire’s to represent and ridicule in *Candide*.

<sup>3</sup> In said work, Leibniz has argued that: “It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Severambian romances: but these same worlds would again be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen this world as it is. We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil” (Leibniz, *Theodicy*, sec.10, p. 94). While it has its charm in the grand edifice of metaphysics, this kind of scholastic “god of the gaps” reasoning clearly nauseates the satirical spirit, particularly as disasters swarm onto the terrestrial stage unchecked.



garden,”(129) and seek simply to make what we are able of the raw existential givens, neither wholly perfect nor wholly imperfect, that nature and culture afford us. To anticipate Haidt’s account of moral psychology, this appears to be a salient example of reconciling the desire for rigid order and meaning on the one hand (which is laughable) with a taste for perpetual change and entropy (equally, implausibly risible) which leaves not resignation but the patient cultivation of one’s own bailiwick, a dialogical reconciliation of preposterous extremes, open.

The same could be said for an individual episode in Goethe’s *Faust*, wherein Mephistopheles assumes the guise of a scholar and persuades an astonished pupil to follow the same path as the eponymous work’s protagonist: “My worthy friend, grey are all theories, /And green alone Life’s golden tree” (Goethe, *Faust Part I*, IV: The Study, 72). As will become clear presently, this is a splendid example of the Menippean manner: using what appears to be learned discourse to *dissuade* a naïve young student who expresses his enthusiasm for theology from pursuing such a course of study in favor of marshalling the dexterity to liberate women from their attire, the better to taste the fruit of that gold-green tree of life. Mephistopheles’ desire to corrupt and deceive the scholar—Faust himself—and the pupil in turn implies that the pursuit of wisdom in an academic milieu foils the intentions of the fiend. Inferring that the *via negativa* holds in this instance as in many others that I will consider henceforth, this can be plausibly interpreted as an argument for the pursuit of both *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, rather than the transcendence of those aims on the one hand or the





frustrated abandonment of them on the other. Faust's replacement of *logos* with *macht*, such that he blasphemously redacts the text of *The Gospel of John*, makes Mephistopheles' temporary triumph apparent:

'Tis written: "In the Beginning was the *Word*."

Here am I balked; who, now can help afford?

The *Word*?—impossible so high to rate it;

And otherwise must I translate it.

If by the Spirit I am truly taught.

Then thus: "In the Beginning was the *Thought*"

This first line let me weigh completely,

Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly.

Is it the *Thought* which works, creates indeed?

"In the Beginning was the *Power*," I read.

Yet, as I write, a warning is suggested,

That I the sense may not have fairly tested.

The Spirit aids me, now I see the light!

"In the Beginning was the *Act*," I write (48).

Here is, perhaps, the single most adroit distillation of one of the *leitmotifs* of academic satire: the emergence of a dramatic existential crisis that pits the restive, rebellious appetite for the realm of resolute action, for thorough engagement with the world of things and people against the contemplative life and the habits and customs, the dusty



solitude, of the study, library or laboratory. Faust's heretical heroism is simultaneously shocking and sublime. To muster the will to overturn the fundamental moral and metaphysical formula that lies at the heart of a cultural tradition that synthesized the impulses of Athens on one hand and Jerusalem on the other—to reject both the virtuous pursuit of knowledge and the knowing pursuit of virtue at a single stroke: here is the scholar shedding sagacity and saintliness and hurling himself into the perilous, passionate flux of life. From Nelson Humboldt<sup>4</sup> to David Lurie<sup>5</sup>, protagonist of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the desire to be immersed in action and feeling and leave mere thought and reflection behind haunts the academic mind and supplies much of the machinery of the plots of academic satires.

Jane K. Brown distills the significance of this tension between the isolated, cogitating self and a broader, more complex and exciting world this way:

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<sup>4</sup> When the protagonist of *The Lecturer's Tale* is endowed with supernatural powers by a strange accident—simply by touching colleagues, students, his wife or anyone else he wishes to work his will upon, he is able to do just that—he endures an agonizing ethical crisis that moves him, interestingly, to reflect upon the moral models harvested not from the pantheon of literary figures he is acquainted with thanks to a rigorous canonical education but the pages of comic books: “Think of what I could do for my family, for my department, he thought, recalling the tormented comic book heroes of his youth—Spiderman, Johnny Storm, the Incredible Hulk—using their miraculous and unasked powers *only for good*. It wouldn't hurt to try, would it? Would it?” (Hynes, *The Lecturer's Tale*, 62). Of course, in an all-too-predictable fulfillment of Lord Acton's cynical maxim, Nelson's power corrupts him, though not irredeemably.

<sup>5</sup> When Coetzee's novel supplies an account of David Lurie's formal censure by the members of the institution where he teaches (a more circumspect account of *Disgrace* follows, incidentally; this note is only supplied in an attempt to confirm the existence of the link between Faust and Lurie, at least in the latter's mind) the protagonist of the piece explains his violation of pedagogical ethical norms this way: “Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that, I was not the same” (Coetzee 52). Thus a mild-mannered professor was devoured, by his own lights, by a primordial passion to urgent to resist. Lurie's obstinate insistence on his innocence in light of this interpretation of events is, unsurprisingly, received with a mixture of incredulity and dismay by his colleagues.



German philosophy in Goethe's day was preoccupied with the gap between the subject, the self in its capacity as perceiver, and the object or non-self. Thus *Faust* appears repeatedly in the drama 'imprisoned' in small gothic chambers and literal prisons which he longs to escape into nature, into the world, into a freedom to experience everything that can be known by the human spirit. German Romantics experimented with various models of mediation between subject and object, the most famous of which is Hegel's dialectic. Goethe completed *Faust I* at a time when he often discussed literature and philosophy with the active Romantic Circle in Jena, which included, among others, Hegel (shortly before he completed his *Philosophy of Mind*). It is not surprising, therefore, to find innumerable contrasting principles at work in *Faust* that are brought into relationship with one another in various fashions, often dialectically (Brown 86).

It is the dialectical tension between the cogitating recluse and the passionate reveler in bodily being that Mephistopheles seeks to resolve in favor of the latter; it is also the case that one of the chief complaints against Socrates' academy is the fact that the students thereof in Aristophanes' *Clouds* neglect the gymnasium in favor of the study<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Strauss summarizes the rigorous but abstemious regime imposed on students in Socrates' thinkery as follows: "He is promised [Strepsiades, the father of Pheidippides, plunged into terrible debt by the latter and therefore obliged to acquire Socrates' sophistry for the sake of evading debt] that he will be blessed and famous, provided that he possesses a good memory, is given to thinking, and dedicates himself with the utmost zeal to study by leading a hard life, abstaining from gymnastics, and preferring victory in action, in counsel and in fighting with the tongue to everything else; sexual abstinence is tacitly included among the requirements" (20). The neglect of the body in favor of the mind is as ancient and simultaneously perennial a problem of the academic as can be imagined.





and become blithely indifferent to the life of the *polis* upon which they rely, parasitically, for sustenance.

Indeed, alienation from, or more precisely, willful abandonment of the terrestrial and the mundane in favor of lofty thought—or absurd intellectual onanism—has been recognized as a feature of the scholar and academic in a myriad of locations outside the bounds of academic satires proper. Recall Gulliver’s hilarious characterization of the inhabitants of the flying island of Laputa and the academy of Lagado:

The first man I saw, was of a meager aspect, with sooty hands and face; his hair and beard long, ragged and singed in several places. His cloaths, shirt, and skin, were all of the same colour: he had been eight years upon a project for extracting sun-beams out of cucumbers; which were to be put into vials, hermetically sealed, and let out warm the air, in raw inclement summers. He told me, he did not doubt, in eight years more, that he should be able to supply the governor’s gardens with sun-shine at a reasonable rate (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 191).

Lost in these bizarre and futile enterprises, the denizens of the flying island and the academy are splendid, silly exaggerations of the obsessive scholarly inquirer. The literal physical abandonment of banal worldliness in favor of the pursuit of “higher things” is made to appear laughable and mad herein, and yet to characterize *Gulliver’s*



*Travels* as a work of academic satire would constitute an obvious category mistake, a conflation of part and whole.

Therefore, my attention is primarily focused upon those works that have mocking the vice and folly of the academy as their central aim: works whose chief narrative mode is satire and whose settings, plots and characters are modeled on and impelled by the world of the academy. Despite this attempt to collapse the parameters of my inquiry, the set of potential objects of analysis visible from this position remains broad and ever-expanding. The wisest course appears to be to essay an analysis of the most ancient exemplar of academic satire and then to move forward, the better to appreciate what academic satire is, to analyze a variety of examples of it, and to attempt to give an account of its implications.

I ought to stipulate at this early stage that not every academic novel is a work of academic satire; this will help to account for the fact that the present study does not amount to an exhaustive discussion of every text that falls into the former category. I have selected a range of texts for analysis that does not encompass the whole array of possible cases, bearing the aforementioned considerations in mind. More can certainly be done in this regard and will be, when there is world enough and time. To cite some encouraging rhetoric that was offered to Nelson Humboldt, the aforementioned protagonist of James Hynes' ingenious hybrid of horror and academic satire, *The Lecturer's Tale*: "A man's reach, Nelson," said Nelson Senior, his voice frighteningly hoarse, 'should exceed his grasp.' Then, in a whisper, 'Or what's a



heaven for?’” (Hynes, *The Lecturer’s Tale*, 14). This conjuration of the spirit of Robert Browning<sup>7</sup> is most apt, as it signals to the awed son that grand aspirations, even unfulfilled, are better than grim resignation to what can be practically managed.

Similarly, I have sought to argue that academic satires, though they are manifold and differ markedly in terms of the matrices of culture, history and language that have nourished and inspired them, do exhibit common features in terms of both form and content that show that academic life, afflicted as it is by many ills, is nevertheless worthy of cultivation and admiration. More specifically, they show that thinking about literature, only one of the occupations of academics—though one given obvious pride of place in literary works *about* the academy by definition: after all, it is possible (I have done it myself) to study and teach academic satire in courses concerning literature within the very confines of the academy they mimetically mirror and satirically scorch—could well illumine aspects of human consciousness and experience that nothing else can.

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson’s father reads to him from Browning’s “Andrea del Sorto,” as part of an education that began when his son was an infant and inspired him to study and teach literature. The complete text of the poem can be found here: [http://web.cn.edu/KWHEELER/documents/Andrea\\_del\\_Sorto.pdf](http://web.cn.edu/KWHEELER/documents/Andrea_del_Sorto.pdf)





### Chapter I: The Thinkery

‘No doubt it’s the teacher’s fault, that our young Arcadian bumpkin feels not a spark of intellectual power in his skull...’

--Juvenal, *Satire VII: The Plight of Intellectuals*

First, consider the most ancient work of academic satire: Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, a work first played out during the Dionysia of 423 B.C.E.<sup>8</sup> *Clouds* contains what can be identified as a caricature of Socrates, not the resolute adversary of relativistic, amoral sophistry — the sort of fellow he may be understood to be by the attentive reader of Plato’s *Dialogues* — but its chief advocate and proselytizer. In Aristophanes’ play, he is a master of “logic-chopping and hair-splitting” (78), rejecting the Gods in favor of worshipping clouds that are metaphorically linked to the mists that gather in the minds of his flummoxed interlocutors. While he is tutoring the irascible bumpkin of a protagonist, Strepsiades, and then his son, Pheidippides, in the art of making the inferior argument defeat the stronger, allowing rhetorical prestidigitation and semantic games to triumph over reason and truth, difficulties develop.

Strepsiades understands this skill to be desirable because he wishes to talk his way out of some debts: “They say they have two Arguments in there — Right and

<sup>8</sup> Csapo and Slater explain: “*Clouds* was first performed at the Dionysia in 423 B.C., but the text was later revised by the author some time between 420–417 as the following passages show, and it is this version that survives today” (Csapo & Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, 5).



Wrong, they call them—and one of them, Wrong, can always win its case even when justice is against it. Well, if you learn this Wrongful Argument, then all of these debts I’ve run into because of you, I needn’t pay anyone an obol because of them” (79). He does not realize that once his son’s training is complete, he will employ his newfound cunning without regard for the codes of conduct that sophistry is expressly interested in undermining. Thus, when Pheidippides is accused of having violated a sacred Athenian ethical norm by giving his father a sound thrashing, he offers this coolly calculated rejoinder:

So beating equals caring [here Pheidippides refers to Strepsiades admission that he (Strepsiades) administered corporal punishment to his infant son for the betterment of his moral character]. In that case, why is it not also right and proper for me to care for you in the same way, by beating *you*? On what principle can you claim to have the privilege of immunity from physical assault, when I did not? I was born free, after all, just as you were. To put it poetically, ‘The son gets thumped, do you think the father shouldn’t?’ You will, no doubt, argue that the custom is only for *children* to be beaten; but I would wish to point out that old age is proverbially a second childhood (100).

Vindicated by his newfound command of the Wrong Argument, Pheidippides feels perfectly at ease whipping his father, metonymically massacring traditional Athenian morality and finally driving the latter to set Socrates’ academy, cleverly identified in



Sommerstein's translation as the "Thinkery,"(80) on fire, punishing all inside for their affront to old fashioned Athenian mores.

Aristophanes' drama can be said, then, to be the prototype of academic satire, not only because of its setting — apart from ancillary action within the precincts of attic Athens, it is the Academy (the aforementioned Thinkery) itself, the ancestor of all of the institutions that have been modeled on it — and its characters: teachers and students and the menagerie of mortals that make up their life-worlds — but also because of the way the tale is told, the dominant narrative mode. Admittedly, this is an ancient work of comic drama, but it is dominated by the satirical mode throughout. Much can be made, particularly in light of Elford Rogers' theory, of the dialogical relationship between the mind and world of the work and the interpretations they generate in concert with the consciousness of the reader. The play conjures a world in which Socrates wields genuine power, in which the Clouds exist and favor his methodology and the weaker argument can and does defeat the stronger in many instances. The mind of the work, however, makes both Socratic sophistry and nostalgia for a perfect and pure Athens look absurd in the end, in a manner that is conspicuously consonant with what occurs and how it is conveyed via *Candide*.

None of those considerations, however, jeopardize the assertion that Aristophanes' work constitutes an urtext that can facilitate judicious analysis of all those that have followed it. The prototype of literary artists — Aristophanes — who have aimed their wit at a specific target — satirists — and the figure about whom all





critical reflection about the origins, nature and destiny of the academy—Socrates—may be said to orbit are bound together by this work.

It ought also to be noted that Socrates recognized in *The Apology* that Aristophanes' treatment of him in *Clouds* had a powerful effect on the popular consciousness of fifth century Athens:

But far more dangerous are these, who began when you were children, and took possession of your minds with their falsehoods, telling of one Socrates, a wise man, who speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause. These are the accusers whom I dread; for they are the circulators of this rumor, and their hearers are too apt to fancy that speculators of this sort do not believe in the gods. And they are many, and their charges against me are of ancient date, and they made them in days when you were impressible - in childhood or perhaps in youth - and the cause when heard went by default, for there was none to answer. And, hardest of all, their names I do not know and cannot tell; unless in the chance of a comic poet (Plato 350).

Two vital questions concerning *Clouds* must be grappled with in order to establish its status as the foundational artifact in the history of academic satire and to assess its implications as such: 1. who did Aristophanes' play seek to attack? 2. How effective is *Clouds* as a means of carrying out that attack and to what effect?



It is a standard result of analyses of Aristophanes' comedy to argue that his caricature of Socrates merits just that name: the Socrates who appears in the drama is decidedly *not* the Socrates, as I indicated above, who is familiar to avid students of Plato and Xenophon<sup>9</sup>. Instead, the Socrates of *Clouds* is the prototype of a Sophist, who cares nothing for conventional ethics, epistemology, metaphysics or theology as long as he is able to persuade his hearers. I believe that this reading of the play is profoundly misguided and that careful scrutiny can reveal that Aristophanes was much more ambivalent with respect to Socrates than a rapid gloss of the play would move one to infer.

Moreover, I believe that the tension between Right and Wrong in the play serves as a model, whether wittingly acknowledged or not, for the dialectical tension straining inside academic satires from *Clouds* to *Lucky Jim*, from *Nice Work* to *The Blue Angel*. In order to fortify that proposition, I intend to appeal to the authority of Jonathan Haidt (the curious tension between signifier and signified here instantly invites laughter from a careful student of satire: a man pre-occupied by moral psychology, ethics and justice whose name is a homophone of blackest rancor—the irony!) whose arguments concerning moral psychology help to elucidate certain vexed

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<sup>9</sup> Strauss asserts: "The Platonic dialogues 'idealize' Socrates. Plato never vouches for the authenticity of his Socratic conversations. Plato is not a historian. The only historian among Socrates' contemporaries on whose writings we must rely for our knowledge of Socrates is Xenophon, who continued Thucydides' history, and who vouches for the authenticity of at least some of his Socratic conversations by introducing them with expressions like, 'I once heard him say.'" (5). This is an important point because it implies that while Aristophanes could well be regarded as having departed from brute facts in his conjuration of the Socrates of *Clouds*, so too did Plato massage the matter to manifest his version. Both imitate the world in language for their own ends, albeit without scrupulous verisimilitude. In that sense, both resemble the Clouds.



questions about the “values” of satirists from Aristophanes to Lodge. Haidt asserts, together with his colleague Jesse Graham, that:

Our thesis in this article is that there are five psychological foundations of morality, which we label as harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Cultures vary on the degree to which they build virtues on these five foundations. As a first approximation, political liberals value virtues based on the first two foundations, while political conservatives value virtues based on all five. A consequence of this thesis is that justice and related virtues (based on the fairness foundation) make up half of the moral world for liberals, while justice-related concerns make up only one fifth of the moral world for conservatives. Conservatives have many moral concerns that liberals simply do not recognize as moral concerns. When conservatives talk about virtues and policies based on the ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations, liberals hear talk about theta waves. For this reason, liberals often find it hard to understand why so many of their fellow citizens do not rally around the cause of social justice, and why many Western nations have elected conservative governments in recent years. In this paper we try to explain how moral emotions and intuitions that are not related to justice can often oppose moral emotions and intuitions that are. In the process we suggest ways that social justice researchers can broaden their appeal and engage in a more





authentic, productive, and ultimately persuasive dialogue with the political moderates and conservatives who compose the majority of the electorate in many democratic nations (Haidt 2-3).

Let me defer a thorough treatment of the substance of this intriguing thesis for a moment, in order to demonstrate that it coincides to a remarkable degree with the scholarly commentary about the complex and often ineffable moral commitments of individual satirists, whose aim—if we bear the formula from Frye’s *The Anatomy of Criticism* in mind, i.e., that the distinguishing feature of satirical works is the presence within them of both wit and a target at which that wit is directed, ostensibly with salutary ends in view—is the correction of vice and folly through laughter, whether darkly misanthropic, bitter and hollow (*vide* the discussion of Beckett in relation to Prose’ *Blue Angel* later in this study) or more warmly comic (as is certainly the case when the alleged Fish doppelganger, Morris Zapp, glibly repeats himself, always as if delivering a fresh and extemporaneous performance of ‘live thinking,’ in *Changing Places* or *Small World*). The natural conclusion that follows from this premise is that satire must attack a specific phenomenon as vicious if, and only if, some contrary, some virtue, is held in higher moral esteem. That is, even if we grant that the preferred route of the satirist is the *via negativa*, lampooning, mocking and deriding what is not consistent with virtue rather than explicitly declaring what virtue amounts to in itself, the very navigation of said *via negativa* **implies** a knowledge of the moral landscape sufficient to make taking the other way possible at all.



A useful summary of the frustration that can result when one probes a wide range of satirical texts for evidence of some universal metric that might bind the minds of these works, to echo Elford Rogers again, together is offered by Leonard Feinberg:

Before accepting the morality theory, we might ask: *Whose* moral norms is satire based on? A universal norm? It is hard [one fairly quails at this stunning understatement] to prove that one exists, except in such vague terms that even bitterly opposing satirists claim simultaneously that they adhere to it. A democratic norm? There has also been satire on behalf of communism, fascism and aristocracy. A Christian norm? Satire appears in every society, including atheistic Russia and skeptical China [given the merit of what is to come, I believe Feinberg ought to be forgiven this clumsy display of sweeping cultural stereotypes. He is, after all, seeking to emphasize the blooming, buzzing profusion of cultural differences, even as—ironically—his rhetoric seeks to homogenize microcosms in order to throw the heterogeneity of macrocosms into relief.]. Some readers approve only of didactic satire, Thomist or humanist or Marxist. But others, quite as well informed, prefer destructive satire which provides what Robert Brustein calls a ‘purely purgative function, relieving the spectator of his outrage and frustration (9-10).

Even if the parameters of the search are shrunk to fit academic satire alone, this problem remains unresolved. Is there a moral norm typical of academics? Even to



begin to mount such an argument seems fit fodder for academic satire in itself! We need only consider Bloom on one hand, exhorting us to return to an ancient and ideal tradition with the innocence of children and a healthy appetite for Great Books:

Vague insistence that without the humanities we will no longer be civilized rings very hollow when no one can say what “civilized” means, when there are said to be many civilizations that are all equal. The claim of the classic loses all legitimacy when the classic cannot be believed to tell the truth. The truth question is most pressing and acutely embarrassing for those who deal with the philosophic texts, but also creates problems for those treating purely literary works. There is an enormous difference between saying, as teachers once did, “You must learn to see the world as Homer or Shakespeare did,” and saying, as teachers now do, “Homer and Shakespeare had some of the same concerns you do and can enrich your vision of the world.” In the former approach students are challenged to discover new experiences and reassess old; in the latter, they are free to use the books in any way they please (Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 374).

As opposed to Lawrence W. Levine, author of *The Opening of the American Mind* (an enormous effort was obviously required to generate a fierce exchange between these two):

At its core, then, multiculturalism as a historical approach means that to understand American culture it is not enough to understand only one of its





components, no matter how important it may have been. It is crucial to study and understand as many of the contributing cultures and their interactions with one another as possible, not as a matter of “therapeutic” history, as the opponents of multiculturalism keep insisting, not to placate and flatter minority groups and make them feel good, as they also assert, but as a simple matter of *understanding* the nature and complexities of American culture and the processes by which it came, and continues to come, into being (160).

These juxtaposed passages exhibit the tension between Bloom’s urgent desire to revivify the former model and abandon the nebulous freedom of the latter, as opposed to Levine’s desire to insist upon the meaning and merit of multiple traditions, not one, which is as thoroughly polyglot, artificial and *a posteriori* as all of the others by his lights. Bloom’s argument concerning the sad state of the humanities and of contemporary society rests on the assertion that a specific canon of texts *used to* have the same claim to truth—albeit moral or metaphysical rather than empirical—that scientifically oriented works now enjoy. He insists that these canonical works must be returned to the sovereign state they once enjoyed, or nothing will follow but free play of the sort that Yahoos engage in with their own feces in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gulliver laments: “Several of this cursed brood [the Yahoos, simian but vaguely human, represent our species stripped of reason, while the Houyhnhnms metaphorically embody reason liberated from the human frame and bestowed upon noble and virtuous equines] getting hold of the branches behind, leaped up into the tree; from whence they began to discharge their excrements on my head” (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 238). The stark bifurcation of our contradictory nature into two entities that



Bloom himself is widely believed<sup>11</sup> to be the corporeal analog of Bellow's eponymous *Ravelstein*. While many have argued that the portrait of Bloom—their critiques are wholly contingent upon the integrity of the link between the fictional character and the historical personage, of course<sup>12</sup>—that emerges from the novel is either a gross distortion or simply brutally, traitorously candid:

Why did Bellow write "Ravelstein"? Is it an act of friendship or betrayal? Did he mean to enhance Bloom's reputation or discredit it? Or is this just what authors do -- tell their friends' secrets? Part way through writing "Ravelstein," Bellow made an effort to confront this question. He sent Werner Dannhauser,

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embody the best and worst of humanity respectively confirms Swift as having been both intimately acquainted with the taught Heraclitean bow of satire and inclined to discharge its bolts against the irrational forces of entropy, to keep the language of Haidt's model in play—not Yahoo-style play, of course...

<sup>11</sup> Robert Fullford diagnosed the reaction to *Ravelstein* this way, managing a fine balance as he did: "Bloom's admirers, however, will not be unanimously grateful. The people who studied with him at Cornell, Toronto, and Chicago speak of him with awe as a great shaping force in their lives. He seems to have humbled even Bellow, not an easy chore, but Bellow obviously believes that greatness deserves frankness, whatever Bloom's other friends think. So he has made Bloom's intimate life part of the story" (Fullford). It is certainly the case that Bellow is frank and if the equation of his protagonist and Bloom is sound, it is so in a way that echoes and amplifies the theory about attacking dissimulation in favor of restoring equilibrium, however painful, that I have propounded time and again in these pages—or will, in due course.

<sup>12</sup> In his review of the novel, "The Rage over Ravelstein," John Uhr makes the following, valuable distinction: "The division among critical responses to the novel is itself significant in illustrating how interpretations of works of fiction relate back to readers' ranking of the philosophy of the real-life models for the works' central characters. In place of this search for the background specifics we should instead appreciate *Ravelstein* as a recent example of literature written with a prominent political theme. World affairs feature through the comments and conduct of Ravelstein, the well-connected professor of political science. Yet Bellow seems more interested in comparing the spiritedness of political life (*thymos*) with the desire or longing for love and friendship (*eros*) which Abe, but not the narrator Chick, seems able to hold in balance" (Uhr). This could not possibly coincide more precisely with my general position, that the attempt to sustain complex and eminently human tensions in the face of dissimulation, rigidity or entropy is the mainspring of the satirist's art. It could be argued that Bellow is not *satirizing* Bloom so much as he is *satyrizing* him, but I think that would miss the point. Showing him as a figure seeking to reconcile *eros* and *thymos*, or as tilting toward Apollo, then toward Dionysus; toward order, then toward entropy; that is much closer to the mark.



a political scientist who had been a close friend and ideological soul mate of Bloom's, a draft of his novel in progress. Dannhauser told him he had included too many details about Bloom's private life. "Did my objections register?"

Dannhauser remembered with an unhappy laugh. "Yes, but he decided to do it anyway" (Max).

Such an account would imply that Bellow betrayed his friend by exposing him (despite the thin shield of the novelist's imaginative inklings) as someone scandalously different from the man he seemed to be, particularly given his sexual mores, which ultimately led to his death.

I think this reading of both the novel and the political and cultural reverberations of it is entirely misleading; not just for the reasons, compelling though they are, raised by Uhr. Bellow writes of Ravelstein (and thus, if we tacitly acknowledge that the *roman-a- clé* has a keyhole so large even Polyphemus, post-Odysseus, could see through it, of Bloom) thusly:

In matters of sex, I sometimes felt Ravelstein saw me as a throwback, an anachronism. I was his close friend. But I was the child of a traditional European Jewish family, with a vocabulary for inversion going back two millennia or more. The ancestral Jewish terms for it were, first, *Tum-tum*, dating perhaps from the Babylonian captivity. Sometimes the word was *andreygenes*, obviously of Alexandrian, Hellenistic origin—the two sexes merged in one erotic and perverse darkness. Mixtures of archaism and



modernity were especially appealing to Ravelstein, who could not be contained in modernity and overflowed all ages. Oddly enough, he was just like that (69<sup>13</sup>).

I believe this to be a particularly telling passage because it shows that Chick, the narrator and therefore Bellow's analog if we wish to follow through on that specific, somewhat vulgar hermeneutic of suspicion, is confessing that he is made very uneasy by Ravelstein's predilections on one level—"erotic and perverse darkness"—even as he confesses to a sort of amazement at the worlds Ravelstein can contain, none of which can fully contain him. Balking at the adoration, much of which is also evident in Bellow's foreword to Bloom's book, e.g.: "what it provides [*The Closing of the American Mind*] is...a trustworthy résumé of the development of the higher mental life in the democratic U.S.A." (Bloom 18), is difficult to resist, though it ought to be noted that it is balanced with that creeping sense of perversity and corruption. Look back to Bloom's dichotomy from *The Closing of the American Mind* for a moment. Is it not the case that the mode of existential comportment attributed to Ravelstein is actually much more proximal to the latter alternative (Levine's), even as it paradoxically fulfills the implications of the former all-too-well?

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<sup>13</sup> It is difficult not to drift toward some kind of theory of serendipitous numerological accidents, given the substance of this passage and the page where it appears. I will abstain, but could not resist bringing it to light. My tone here is not intended to be puerile—the felicitous enfolding of difference by graphic unity is what I find intriguing. Leave the sophomoric snickering for the panty-raiders in Roth's *Indignation*.





To elucidate: we have the hypothesis to consider, *pace* Uhr, that Ravelstein is able to keep the tension between private passion and public, political philosophy alive within himself without being torn asunder by it. We must also factor in the notion that Bloom wished to resuscitate the canon in a way that would make that collection of texts an inexhaustible fund of answers to, “The kinds of questions children ask: Is there a God? Is there freedom? Is there punishment for evil deeds? Is there certain knowledge? What is a good society?”(372). Suppose we essay a synthesis of all of these elements, and in light of that strange and fascinating passage from *Ravelstein*, ask Aristophanes what love is? That is, why not ask a canonical text for an answer to the question raised by *Ravelstein*? More precisely, I suppose, we will be asking that simulacrum of Aristophanes generated by the philosophical imagination of Plato what love is. Therefore, we will also be sustaining that tension between flesh and fiction that haunts so much of the discussion of Bellow’s novel.

In the course of Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes is asked to take his turn as the principle discussant of the theme of love. He offers this oration (fear not, I do not intend to include the whole of his extraordinary address, which we ought to remember, is given to his fictional analog by the most eminent disciple of his satirical target in *Clouds*):

First you must learn what Human Nature was in the beginning and what has happened to it since, because long ago our nature was not what it is now, but very different. There were three kinds of human beings, that’s my first



point—not two as there are now, male and female. In addition to these, there was a third, a combination of those two; its name survives, though the kind itself has vanished. At that time, you see, the word “androgynous” really meant something: a form made up of male and female elements, though now there’s nothing but the word, and that’s used as an insult [...] they were spherical, and so was their motion[...]in strength and power, therefore, they were terrible, and they had great ambitions. They made an attempt at the gods [...] At last, after great effort, Zeus had an idea (Plato, *Symposium*, 26).

To summarize the emergence of this bold plan and its aftermath: Zeus cleft the eight-limbed, spherical, androgynous beings in twain; they were hideously, albeit understandably, maladjusted; some anatomical refinements were introduced by Apollo at Zeus’ behest, and therefore we all seek love and comfort in the arms of an “other half,” seeking as we do so the original, powerful, dangerous union of what are now perceived to be essentially distinct and opposite entities. Chick’s intuition about Ravelstein is obviously illuminated by this ancient lamp. So too is Haidt’s theory, along with the vexed question of the values of the satirist in general and the academic satirist in particular.

Haidt’s theory is expressly designed to encourage understanding between those who seem to be influenced by mutually exclusive moral psychologies. It seems natural to allude to Bloom’s work again at this juncture, because the idea of dialogue



between discursive worlds in the academy that are ostensibly unintelligible to one another strikes him as farcical. He scoffs:

A perfect illustration of this situation [the lamentable relativism that spawns “interdisciplinary dialogue” and pretends that the social sciences and humanities are not being swallowed whole by the leviathan of the empirical sciences] appeared a few years ago in a *New York Times* account of the visit of a professor of music to Rockefeller University. The life scientists working there brought bag lunches to the musicologist’s lecture. The project was inspired by C.P. Snow’s silly conceits [Bloom is, as always, measured and circumspect in his commentary on the ideas and arguments of others] about “the two cultures,” the rift between which he proposed to heal by getting humanists to learn the second law of thermodynamics and physicists to read Shakespeare [...] the *Times* quoted Joshua Lederberg, the president of Rockefeller University, from which philosophy had recently been banished, as saying after the lecture that C.P. Snow was on the right track but “counted wrong,”—there are not two but many cultures, one example of which is that of the Beatles. This represents the ultimate trivialization of a trivial idea that was just a rest station on a downward slope [and the award for mixing metaphors goes to...] (Bloom 350).

A swarm of implications, all of them ominous, flies from this passage: Snow was clearly a flake; the life (heretofore empirical) sciences have won the day and they are





pleased to take bag lunches to humanities lectures to survey the moldering remains of the “second culture”; the study of popular music is worse than useless and post-secondary institutions are busily banishing Socrates to the outer darkness.

Despite this jeremiad, Haidt’s research concerning moral psychology has significant explanatory power, both with regard to the Bloom/Ravelstein controversy and the moral orientation of the academic satirist. That is, I am seeking to instantiate herein the sort of interdisciplinary co-operation that Bloom dismisses as a joke. If dialogue between individuals who construct their respective *ethoi* on different foundations is possible, surely interdisciplinary dialogue can yield more than snide mutual recrimination or smug self-congratulation—surely, too, Ravelstein can be simultaneously a wise and eloquent advocate of the canonical tradition *and* an *andreygenes*. Haidt’s argument in defense of the thesis that I cited at some length above produced this conclusion:

To summarize, we have argued for three main points: (1) Human morality consists of more than what is covered by the traditional Kohlberg/Gilligan domains of justice and care. (2) Liberal morality rests primarily on these two foundations (we call them fairness/reciprocity and harm/care), whereas conservative morality rests on five foundations, including ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity concerns as well. (3) Recognizing these latter foundations as moral (instead of amoral, or immoral, or just plain stupid) can open up a door in the wall that separates liberals and conservatives



when they try to discuss moral issues. We would love to have persuaded you on the first two points, but the third point is more important than our specific theory. Social justice researchers and activists have much to gain by opening their ears to the moral nature of arguments related to ingroup, authority, and purity, and much to lose if they do not. Even if social justice researchers never come to care about group cohesion, institutional integrity, or divinity as much as conservatives do, it will still be crucial for them to understand these cares, especially when they conflict with the virtues of compassion, justice, and equality that the social justice community values so dearly (Haidt 15-16).

What these assertions imply is rather startling and also perfectly thematically contiguous with much of academic satire. As I have endeavored to demonstrate through the comparative analysis of a broad range of texts that feature exemplary deployments of the satirical mode in works of fiction about the academy, drawing evidently antithetical worlds into dialogue inevitably dissolves dissembling folly and reveals that those who appear to be firmly allied to a particular *Lebenswelt*, theoretical tradition or moral model are as complex, contradictory, fallible and prone to folly as any all-too-human subject. While it will undoubtedly prove to be the case that David Lodge's academic novels are the strongest and clearest examples of academic satires that bring dramatically different spheres of academic life (*Changing Places*, *Small World* and *Thinks...*) or worlds beyond the confines of the small world of academe



into fecund colloquy with it (*Nice Work* and *Deaf Sentence*) Lodge is by no means entirely unique.

David Lurie's disintegration after he haughtily quits the confines of the academy, only to endure the torment of being rendered powerless to prevent the rape of his daughter or ending his days as the "dog psychopomp" (Coetzee 146) is tragic testimony to his utter inability to abandon the *hubris* of the aloof aesthete until he must, grudgingly, accept utter defeat at the hands of a moral order that was formerly alien, brutish and invisible to him; Jian Wan's abandonment of academic life in Ha Jin's *The Crazy* is similarly motivated—he is being pursued by various government agents in the wake of the Tiananmen Square chaos and the realization that, "For ordinary people like us, suffering can only make us meaner, crazier, pettier, and more wretched" (Ha Jin, *The Crazy*, 319); Nelson Humboldt's cheerful realization, after the ruination of his department and the loss of his supernatural powers, to the effect that the naked simplicity of a lecture on *David Copperfield* is really all that divides him from the dark: "It will have to do, he told himself, because it's all I've got to give them" (Hynes, *The Lecturer's Tale*, 386); all, though the trajectories of their respective plots may be comic or tragic, have been obliged to abandon their accustomed *ethoi* and reckon with self and world in a completely different way. Satire has not vindicated one way of being over another, but revealed that dissembling and inauthenticity must be punctured to make way for fallible, fundamental freedom. It goes to show that the academy is the ideal zone in which to contemplate myriad



worlds and strike up dialogue between them rather than favor one over the other without sober second thought. Anything else is a laughable, lamentable betrayal of the pursuit and dissemination of wisdom that form the core of academic life.

In a similar fashion, Aristophanes' *Clouds* reveals that both the traditional and the iconoclastic *ethoi*, both the Right and Wrong Arguments, contain conspicuous contradictions that reveal their steadfast advocates as either dreamers about a past that was actually far from utopian or nihilistic relativists without the necessary awareness of their dependence on the *polis* and on *logos*, on some sense of order and meaning, to survive. Thus the Right Argument, anthropomorphized and drawn into debate in the Thinkery with an equally tangible Wrong Argument, is heard to proclaim:

RIGHT: Hot baths are *bad*. They make a man a coward.

WRONG: Hold it! I've scored one there, right away, and there's no way you can wriggle out of it. Tell me, of the sons of Zeus, who would you say was the bravest man and performed the greatest number of labours?

RIGHT: The best of them was unquestionably Heracles.

WRONG: And have you ever heard of Heracles having a *cold* bath? [RIGHT *is speechless*.] Well, was he the bravest of them all, or wasn't he?

RIGHT: [*spluttering*]: That—that—that's just the sort of clever stuff that you hear the young lads coming out with all day! So they flock to the public baths and leave the wrestling-schools empty (113).





Thus the traditional *ethos* is shown to be self-contradictory, vulnerable to mocking exposure as a tissue of platitudes that often contravene one another. On the other hand, the Wrong Argument depends for success upon sustaining the ideality of Heracleian heroism, such that the seemingly trivial practice of taking hot baths, a violation of the normative edicts of the Right Argument, can be shown to pose no threat to vigor, vitality or virtue. They depend on one another—Right and Wrong—for dialectical re-invigoration, and importantly, Socrates takes no side in the contest, and does not applaud the apparent victory of the Wrong Argument. The tension between the two underwrites the possibility of thinking about both, from a vantage point free of unthinking allegiance to either. That vantage point is afforded to its denizens by the academy.

What ought to be emphasized here is that satire does not feature mockery and ridicule as ends-in-themselves. The following general claim concerning the nature of the satirist turns out to ring hollow in the face of texts produced by authors as distant from one another in time and distinct in terms of authorial technique as Aristophanes and Donna Tartt: “The satirist, by definition, stands in opposition to the current state of affairs, endeavoring to change things, either to what they were in a recalled, and often mythologized, past, or to what they might be in a preferred, and frequently Utopian, future”(Gordon). As the culminating debate in *Clouds* goes to show, this is a grotesque oversimplification; to put it yet more elegantly, “Aristophanes pronounces the things just things like the Just Speech [heretofore the Right Argument *pace*



Summerville]; he exhorts to a life of sensual pleasure and of laughter like the Unjust Speech [Wrong Argument]. The two parts of Aristophanes' work are not simply in harmony" (Strauss 33). Thus the academic satirist's opposition is, at the last, to that essentially ironic but ubiquitous tendency, both universal and particular, to conflate appearance and reality, the substitution, by commission or omission, of dissembling and obfuscation for genuine acceptance of the flawed and fumbling, contradictory and complex creatures that we are. A similar argument concerning the human predicament, both laughable and laudable, appears in Pope's *Essay on Man*:

This light and darkness in our chaos join'd. What shall divide? The God within the mind. Extremes in Nature equal ends produce, in man they join to some mysterious use; though each by turns the other's bounds invade, as, in some well-wrought picture, light and shade, and oft so mix, the difference is too nice, where ends the virtue or begins the vice (Pope, *Essay on Man*, *Epistle II*, 58).

In keeping with this theme, Aristophanes synthesizes the Right and Wrong Arguments into an integrated "third being" that precisely corresponds to the spherical creatures that were sundered by Olympian wrath in his parable in *The Symposium*, or Chick's description of Ravelstein in the eponymous novel. A both/and logic emerges that makes the adversarial dynamic look ridiculous, absurd, worthy of derisive laughter. Neither the liberal perspective, mode or system—to link this argument to the substance of Haidt's research on moral psychology—nor the conservative mode or



system is sufficient in itself to encompass the whole of the human sphere, which is at the last a mixture of the frailties and powers of the two. Neither the return to an ancient utopian past, which is shown by the remarks of the Right Argument to have been a playground of pederasts, nor a complete surrender to entropy and chaos, which would be the logical outcome of the triumph of the Wrong Argument, suffices to either explain the past of the *polis* or anticipate its future, for the combination of order and entropy into a third ontological modality is not only what was or has been, *but what is*. Where is that protean, profound, silly, salacious truth discovered? In the Thinkery, the ancestor of the academic sphere, where rival meta-narratives are not just caught in perpetual mutual antagonism but subject to free inquiry and even ridicule from the Socratic perspective. To anticipate Lodge—to secure a loan from the future of my own analysis, as it were—the moment when this same collision and stunned mutual recognition of rival paradigms occurs in *Small World* occurs when Persse innocently but ingeniously asks the most eminent and eloquent exponents of a host of rival theoretical and interpretive camps, from Marxists and Feminists to Leavisites and Reader-Response Theorists: “I would like to ask each of the speakers,” said Persse, “What follows if everybody agrees with you?” (Lodge, *Small World*, 319).

It is here that a very strong link emerges between what Christopher Norris, borrowing heavily from the philosopher of language Donald Davidson, has characterized as “trans-paradigm criteria” (*Deconstruction and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, 43), and the peculiar potential of academic satire. Though the spelling





out of the implications of this idea must be postponed until individual works apart from *Clouds* can be mined for evidence, I hope it will suffice for the nonce to assert that the contest between the Right and Wrong Arguments does not unfold in the Thinkery by accident. On the contrary, in the Academy, when it ceases to dissemble, as it were, and lives up to its most extraordinary potential—when Laputa lands, if you will—becomes the ideal context in which myriad life-worlds, ideas, languages, theories, systems of value and meaning (one could conceivably compile an infinitely lengthy, Rabelaisian list of synonymous words and phrases in this regard<sup>14</sup>) can speak to one another in a mutually intelligible way. It is the locus of trans-paradigm *logos*, where being invested in a particular system, game, paradigm or interpretive modality is always already transcended by the willingness to survey, compare and discuss the alternatives. This is the secret<sup>15</sup> of *Clouds*, according to Strauss:

Above all, Socrates' way of life [*ethos*] differs from the ways recommended by the two speeches because the latter are based on the premise, vouched for by the poets, that the gods lead a life of bliss, whereas Socrates holds that the gods do not even exist; even if they did exist, he would not have taken them as

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<sup>14</sup> It is in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a book that bursts with carnivalesque energy and imaginative excess, that we find a list of card games played by the principle personages in the narrative that includes no fewer than 150 individual games, none of which actually plays out in the narration: what we are presented with is a wonderfully strange catalogue of individual games that might only be played in the possible world of Rabelais' surfeited imagination, from "S'welp me God" to "The Dead Beast." (Rabelais, 83-85, Book I, Chapter 22: *Gargantua's Games*).

<sup>15</sup> I am well aware that talking about secrets and Strauss in the same sentence could generate some readerly anxiety about the underlying assumptions about "close reading" that underwrite this diction. My point is simply that the Straussian analysis explains the text convincingly, not that there is some occult riddle in the play that only a mysterious "close reading" can reveal to some esoteric elite.



his model because of their childishness as shown by their indifference to **learning** [emphasis mine]. In the Socratic scheme the debate between the speeches is only a stage on the ascent toward the right life: the Unjust Speech is, as it were, the self-destruction of justice as supported by the gods (Strauss 33).

Thus the Thinkery plays host to the revelation that the antithetical arguments are ironically, laughably mutually constitutive. They comport themselves as adversaries but depend upon one another, and this is something known to the thinker in his Thinkery, which makes him dangerously free. To illustrate how this same theme plays out in a host of academic satires is my next task.



## *Chapter Two: Students*

“When Achilles (no longer a child) was learning the lyre in his native hills, he had to beware of the cane; and would never have dared to laugh at the tail of his music master. But Rufus and the rest are now chastised by their own students—“

--Juvenal, *Satire VII: The Plight of Intellectuals*

One of the most powerful forms of academic satire is written from the perspective of the student rather than the sage. In works of this nature, a fresh perspective on the vice and folly of the academy is made accessible, as are myriad matters that delight and bedevil both the mental and material faculties of the narrator/protagonist. Instead of the weary, jaded cynicism or ambitious careerism of the heavy laborer of the mind, the student can exhibit a rich array of distinct dispositions, drives and deductions based on what, to an older eye, accustomed to the life of the academy, appears to be dull nonsense.

### **Tartt**

Donna Tartt’s novel, *The Secret History*, is one such work: a campus novel that unquestionably features potent satirical elements and also reveals the perils of austere aestheticism and ersatz immersion in a different, more ancient and esoteric way of understanding self and world. It is also important that this novel could well be read as



a thought experiment based on some of the substance of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>16</sup>, insofar as the central characters are invited by their enigmatic, erudite mentor to "...leave the phenomenal world and enter into the sublime..."(430), i.e., to accelerate beyond the petty pace of quotidian existence and plunge themselves into the aesthetic and moral world of Attic Greece, primarily by means of the close study of ancient texts in the original language.

The plot of the piece is quite simple: a group of sophisticated, erudite students enter the orbit of a brilliant professor who exhorts them to live in an alternate world. In particular, Julian, the charismatic, mysterious oracle who beguiles all of them, seeks to inculcate a love for the wisdom and beauty of ancient Greek culture that only a thorough command of that people's language can adequately afford. In the process of seeking better to understand the ancients, the most formidable intellect in the group, Henry, decides to persuade his colleagues to seek to recreate an ancient Dionysian rite, a wild bacchanal that, despite Tartt's deliberately evasive, fragmentary description of it, evokes Euripides' *The Bacchae*. This process is set in motion by the

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<sup>16</sup> Bloom laments, for example: "Sated with easy, clinical and sterile satisfactions of body and soul, the students arriving at the university today hardly walk on the enchanted ground they once did. They pass by the ruins without imagining what was once there. Spiritually detumescent, they do not seek wholeness in the university. These most productive years of learning, the time when Alcibiades was growing his first beard, are wasted because of artificial precociousness and a sophistic wisdom acquired in high school" (Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 136). The allusion to Plato's *Symposium*—more specifically, to Alcibiades as the student of Socrates—could not be more convenient for my purposes, in the sense that Bloom equates natural wholeness, wisdom and truth with the sensibilities of the ancients that are lost to the nihilistic, relativistic student of today. Tartt has decided, it would seem, to test this hypothesis in *The Secret History*: what if some thoroughly engaged young minds decided to live according to the ancient, esoteric wisdom of Dionysian occult praxis? The result, of course, is bloody chaos, not more authentic, noble living.





only seminar discussion that the narrator/protagonist supplies a detailed account of, which includes this rather provocative episode:

“The Greeks were different. They had a passion for order and symmetry, much like the Romans, but they knew how foolish it was to deny the unseen world, the old gods. Emotion, darkness, barbarism.” He looked at the ceiling for a moment, his face almost troubled. “Do you remember what we were speaking of earlier, of how bloody, terrible things are sometimes the most beautiful?” he said. “It’s a very Greek idea, and a very profound one. Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely? To throw off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves? Euripides speaks of the Maenads: head thrown back throat to the stars, ‘more like deer than human being.’ To be absolutely free! One is quite capable, of course, of working out these destructive passions in more vulgar and less efficient ways. But how glorious to release them in a single burst!” (42).

What is vital about this discussion is that it succeeds all too well in firing the imaginations of Julian’s pupils and thus sets the machinery of the grizzly tragedy awaiting these young people into motion. Like Oedipus vanquishing the Sphinx, they come to believe in their own excellence to such a degree that they think nothing of murder and overestimate their collective capacity to evade mundane justice; they are



deluded into thinking of themselves as Nietzschean *übertmenschen*<sup>17</sup>, above slave morality. The implication seems to be that slipping the surly bonds of quotidian reality, cultivating a radically different way of understanding self and world, inevitably precipitates a rejection of moral constraint that yields savagery and mayhem.

What is particularly compelling about Tartt's narrative is that it leaves one with the sense that aestheticism is ultimately amoral, even as it proves to be beautiful in itself. There is an alien, terrifying coldness in the hearts of both Henry and Julian that moves Julian to reject the contemporary world with a kind of puzzled, avuncular sigh, while the other thinks nothing of slaying its citizens, for they are as dwarves to his gigantic mind, his power to conjure up Dionysus and slip as easily from Attic Greek to Sanskrit as his fellow pupils at the Vermont college where the piece is set

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<sup>17</sup> Bloom is an advocate of this kind of elitism: cultivating the sense that the student of the ideal canon of texts transcends the *hoi polloi*: "They [the students in one of Bloom's vaunted seminars, held during the height of sixties radicalism at the University of Chicago] were really more interested in the book than the revolution, which in itself proved what kind of counter-charm the university ought to provide to the siren calls of the contemporary scene. These students were rather contemptuous of what was going on, because it got in the way of what they thought it important to do. They wanted to find out what happened to Glaucon during his wonderful night with Socrates. They really *looked down* from the classroom on the frantic activity outside, thinking they were privileged, hardly a one tempted to join the crowd" (Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 332). Note that this is an excellent example of the tension between ivory tower elitism and the desire (virtually non-existent in Bloom's account) to engage with the world. While Bloom leaves us in no doubt about his preference, a subsequent part of his tale is telling: "They made copies of the following lines from *The Republic* and handed them out, competing with the hawkers of other kinds of tracts: 'Do you not believe, as do the many, that certain young men are corrupted by sophists, and that there are certain sophists who in a private capacity corrupt to an extent worth mentioning?' [...] They had learned from this old book what was going on and had gained real distance on it, had had an experience of liberation"(333) Bloom reads this as a triumph of the loftier world over the one beneath it but it is very important to weigh the practice of his students against his theory: they take what they have learned and seek the better to understand and act in the broader world thanks to it, to integrate apparently adversarial worlds: Laputa landed, not with crushing force but in order to strike up a dialogue with those who were formerly seen to be 'beneath' its inhabitants and their profound, lofty thoughts.



exchange albums or bodily fluids. While this could be construed as anti-intellectualism or democratic, egalitarian piety, Tartt deftly avoids this conclusion, largely because the narrator/protagonist of the piece conveys both the delicious intoxication of learning and the tragedy of mixing contemporary nihilism and egotism with a patina of ancient wisdom. Things go awry, ultimately, because the students who commit the murders that this piece is devoted to chronicling are guilty of mistaking the ability to see the world differently for the ability to shape it according to one's impulses and instincts, no matter how base. Too much Euripides and too little Plato and Aristotle makes for a toxic cocktail that they administer to others and themselves.

Paradoxically, as I have already asserted vis-à-vis what turn out to be two murders, one practically inadvertent—a consequence of the ecstatic rite—the other coolly calculated and therefore, in a sense, much more alarming, the problem with the situation experienced by these characters is that they actually manage to conjure up an ancient pagan god: they access a reality, disclosed to them by the close study of antique texts, that somehow vindicates their rejection of the moral conventions of their own day. They do things that are morally repugnant but they do them because they are convinced that they are not wrong, because they have experienced something at once fresh and profoundly old. Henry summarizes the situation for an incredulous Richard (the aforementioned narrator/protagonist) as follows:





He shrugged. “Nothing,” he said. “Except that my life, for the most part, has been very stale and colorless. Dead, I mean. The world has always been an empty place to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I felt dead in everything I did.” He brushed the dirt from his hands. “But then it changed,” he said. “The night I killed that man.”

I was jarred—a little spooked, as well—at so blatant a reference to something referred to, by mutual agreement, almost exclusively with codes, catchwords, a hundred different euphemisms.

“It was the most important night of my life,” he said calmly. “It enabled me to do what I’ve always wanted most.”

“Which is?”

“To live without thinking” (493).

Despite some evidence to the contrary that I will treat of presently, Tarrt is not aiming her satirical bolt at pretentious elitism or intellectual vanity alone in this context. Her novel constitutes both a celebration of the intoxication that can come from intensive study and the consequent experience—at least apparent, if not genuine or complete—of other worlds and modes of existential comportment and a cautionary tale about the dangers that await those who think their capacity to see the world differently encounter when they also infer that on the basis of their unusual knowledge, they are given license to sneer at the morality of the common herd.



Tartt's novel contains several accounts of what the German philosopher and distinguished defender of the hermeneutical method, Wilhelm Dilthey, identified as follows:

Action everywhere presupposes our understanding of other people; much of our happiness as human beings derives from our re-experiencing [*Nachfülen*] of alien states of mind; the entire science of philology and of history is based on the presupposition that such recomprehension [*Nachverständnis*] of individual existence can be raised to objective validity. The historical consciousness constructed on this basis has enabled modern man to hold the entire past of humanity present within himself: across the limits of his own time he peers into vanished cultures, appropriating their energies and taking pleasure in their charm, with a consequent increase in his own happiness (101).

It is in this sense that Tartt shares something in common with Lodge: her novel does not simply attack the problems of the academy and its denizens but also exhibits a keen sensitivity to the rare and remarkable ideas and experiences that await the enthusiastic student. The narrator/protagonist of *The Secret History* employs the narrative mode of retrospective exposition throughout, such that his account of the experiences of his younger self is refracted by the lens of his older self's eye. His rapt account of one of the chief reasons for his desire to become part of the small cluster of students that follow, like ancient peripatetics, the path of the mesmerizing Julian,



sounds very much like Dilthey's explanation of the process of thinking oneself into other worlds, or other ways of reading the only one, the collocation of contraries:

In a certain sense, this was why I felt so close to the others in the Greek class. They, too, knew this beautiful and harrowing landscape, centuries dead; they'd had the same experience of looking up from their books with fifth-century eyes and finding the world disconcertingly sluggish and alien, as if it were not their home. It was why I admired Julian, and Henry in particular. Their reason, their very eyes and ears were fixed irrevocably in the confines of those stern and ancient rhythms—the world, in fact, was not their home, at least not the world as I knew it—and far from being occasional visitors to this land which I myself knew only as an admiring tourist, they were pretty much its permanent residents, as permanent as I suppose it was possible for them to be (Tartt 200).

This passage merits careful analysis because, despite the ecstatic tone, the diction is ultimately careful: Richard does not go so far as to suggest, *pace* Dilthey, that either of these men genuinely inhabits an ancient world of thought and experience. He stipulates that they do so only to a point, admitting that a thoroughgoing immersion is only to be aspired to, never fully achieved. That final note is telling because it is one that Henry would not have sounded. It is his hubris that undoes the central characters in the novel: he is audacious, brash, even mad, save for the fact that the deliberately occluded, fragmentary account of the Dionysian bacchanal that emerges implies that it



was *real*, that these students managed to conjure up an antique deity and run with him through the inky woods of a Vermont night.

Darker signs emerge in the course of this narrative: indications that the members of the Greek class are so absorbed in texts that they cannot see stark reality for what it is. Reflecting on the murder of Bunny Corchoran (one of their own elite cadre and a friend to all who proves a palpable threat when he seems to be considering a wholesale confession to the authorities) Camilla, the fairer of twins who are also Julian's students, makes the following observation: "Because it's terrible luck to leave a body unburied. That farmer they found straightaway, you know. But remember poor Palinurus in the *Aeneid*? He lingered around them and haunted them for the longest time. I'm afraid that none of us are going to have a good night's sleep until Bunny's in the ground" (359). What is of primary concern to this beautiful, profoundly strange young woman is not the looming prospect of being apprehended for the murders of both an innocent Vermont poultry farmer and her troubled fellow student; nor is she perturbed in the least by the psychological and moral implications of these murders, either for herself or her accomplices. What troubles her most, instead, is the possibility that an ancient superstition will be borne out by contemporary experience: the laws, both supernatural and mundane, that governed the ancient, epic world of Virgil's poetic imagination will make it impossible for her and her friends to sleep in twentieth century America because a vengeful revenant will prevent their quiet slumber.





While this is oddly compelling and obviously quixotic, it is also bloodcurdling. This is the case not only because the execution of a peer is problematic only because it will lead to nightmares and insomnia but also because there seems to be nothing outside the text, to appropriate Derrida's maxim for unorthodox purposes. In the words of James K.A. Smith's *Jacques Derrida*:

This assertion regarding the primordially of mediation, spacing, difference is the horizon for Derrida's oft-misunderstood claim that 'there is nothing outside of the text' [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*], which is better translated 'there is no outside-text.' *The hors-texte* is the buffer of blank pages at the beginning and end of a book, the sheets that are without text. Derrida's assertion that there is no outside-text means that there is no aspect of our 'experience'—that interpretive way in which we navigate our being-in-the-world—that escapes the play of signifiers or the conditioning of *difference* (44).

One could easily object that this sounds exactly like the sort of obscurantism and onanistic jargon mongering that I have discussed elsewhere, which comes in for such a deft and vicious thrashing at the hands of several academic satirists. Recall, for example, the strip-tease of eternally deferred meaning that was such a crucial component of Zapp's polemic in *Small World*<sup>18</sup>. What emerges in *The Secret History*,

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<sup>18</sup> Zapp proclaims: "To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. *But every decoding is another encoding.* If you say something to me I check that I have understood your message by saying it back to you in my own words, that is, different words from the ones you used, for if I repeat your own words exactly you will doubt whether I have really understood you. But if I use *my* words it follows that I have changed *your* meaning, however slightly; [...] the reader plays with himself as the



though, is by no means symptomatic of postmodern skepticism about the existence of some truth external to a given system of signs that is not always already filtered through and mediated by a given hermeneutical strategy. Instead, Henry and the others are convinced that they have pierced the veil of ordinary reality and come to live and move and have their being in a fashion consistent with the *Lebenswelt* of Attic Greece, when protean deities appeared to blood-soaked devotees and demanded sacrifices. In a sense, this is equivalent to the predicament of Cervantes' bedraggled knight-errant:

In short, he so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his wits. He filled his mind with all that he read in them, with enchantments, quarrels, battles challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, torments and other impossible nonsense; and so deeply did he steep his imagination in the belief that all the fanciful stuff he read was true, that to his mind no history of the world was more authentic (Cervantes 13).

What distinguishes the exploits of Don Quixote from those of Julian's students is simply that they have become so thoroughly absorbed in the literature of Greek

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text plays upon him"(Lodge, *Small World*, 26-27). While there is mischief in the end designed to irritate Phillip Swallow, the point carries: making meanings is a much more malleable matter than one might ordinarily infer and a final, complete decoding is indefinitely deferred. Lodge's work brings Swallow and Zapp into one another's orbit in order to show that both have a point: the innocent aesthetic enjoyment of literary artifacts is wonderful, but close scrutiny will show that their apparent meaning often differs markedly from the meaning of the interpretations they produce.



antiquity as to believe that it is more authentic than the world as it is ordinarily encountered and understood in modern Vermont, just as Quixote believed that windmills were giants or a shaving basin was a magical golden helmet. Cervantes' narrator laments that the protagonist of the piece has gone mad, making him an absurd figure of fun, a pathetic victim of an elaborate bibliomaniacal delusion; Richard, the narrator/protagonist of Tarrt's novel, though, conveys the distinct impression that there may be some truth to what his peers experienced. That is, they have really shed one world for another—they are not merely deluded or deranged. Unfortunately, however, they interpret that experience as a license to destroy with impunity, as opposed to a means to recover something nobler and purer than the world as it stands.

The urgent questions given the nature of the present project are these: what specific target does Tarrt aim at, does she strike it, and to what effect? The fact that the students who follow Julian about so avidly decide to take his engrossing theoretical analysis of Greek ideas and transform it into a praxis shows, as does Prose's *Blue Angel*, that such exercises have dramatic, dangerous implications. Ironically, the academy, which is too often equated with Swift's grand academy of Lagado or the Socratic Thinkery of Aristophanes, has in this specific instance sown and nourished the seeds of ideas so powerful, that they utterly undo those who harbor them.





## Wolfe

Tom Wolfe's latest novel is as popular as swine flu. Critics have been caustic and contemptuous toward it from the moment of its publication, as is eloquently confirmed by the following indictment, culled from Michiko Kakutani's review in *The New York Times*:

In a famous and much contested 1989 literary manifesto, Tom Wolfe called upon novelists to head "out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property." He exhorted "a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas" to take fiction writing back from the navel-gazers and post-modernists and to re-embrace the realist tradition -- to tackle, pinion and hog-tie the great American zeitgeist, to document what he once called the "irresistibly lurid carnival of American life."

In his flat-footed new novel, "I Am Charlotte Simmons," Mr. Wolfe does not tackle the zeitgeist. He does not tackle big-city racial politics, big-business financial shenanigans or big-time criminal justice as he did in his first two novels, "The Bonfire of the Vanities" (1987) and "A Man in Full" (1998). Nor does he lasso the sights and sounds and language -- the ineluctable feel of a decade -- as he did in those earlier books.



Instead Mr. Wolfe takes on the momentous subject of college life (college life? Yes, college life!), and in the course of a very long 676 pages serves up the revelation -- yikes! -- that students crave sex and beer, love to party, wear casual clothes and use four-letter words. (Kakutani)

Thus Wolfe's novel is simply a failure, an attempt on the part of the pioneering patriarch of journalistic social realism to enter a world that he cannot comprehend and ought to have steered clear of. What strikes Wolfe as astonishing and deplorable in contemporary academic life is, from the perspective of a canny and sophisticated reader, banal. Granted, there is something decidedly bizarre about imagining the now very grey, sartorially splendid Wolfe drifting into frat parties and college seminars in a vain attempt to capture the essence of the small world of academe for his imagined reader. Another reviewer, Priya Jain, paints this picture very vividly:

News of Tom Wolfe's latest novel started circulating long before the release date was announced; mostly, the reports contained lines like this one from the Tallahassee Democrat: "During the research phase for the novel in the late '90s, Wolfe ... ended up at 'a lot of frat parties' at the University of Florida." The image that conjures up -- of the 70ish writer in a high-collared shirt and white suit hanging against the wall at a late-night college booze fest, scribbling in his reporter's notebook while 18-year-olds did keg stands -- is not easy to get rid of once it lodges itself in your brain. (To be fair, Wolfe apparently changed into a navy blazer for his undercover missions.) And it



certainly raised some doubts about the book in question. How would he ever convince his subjects to "act natural" in front of him? And what idea of collegians would he come away with? (Jain)

To top it off, consider the following formula: the praise of fools is worth the scorn of sages, and then try to redeem Wolfe's novel after discovering that, according to the *International Herald Tribune*: "The President has not only read Wolfe's new book but is enthusiastically recommending it to friends" (O'Connor). The erstwhile President in question is, of course, the noted literary intellectual George W. Bush, whose tastes famously draw him toward such weighty tomes as *My Pet Goat*. Is there a way to rescue anything of worth from a novel that counts this widely reviled figure among its strongest allies?

I wish to argue, though it will sound profoundly counterintuitive, that there is. More precisely, I am convinced that many who have dismissed the whole project as absurd have missed some rather obvious clues as to what the mammoth meaning making machine of this novel was actually designed to yield. I fully expect that the deployment of so incendiary a verb as "design" will generate enormous skepticism about my efforts. With apologies to Foucault and Barthes, I shall press on; largely because I maintain that the outmoded notion of authorial intention has a significant role to play in redeeming this novel in one light only to disclose its failure in another. Speaking of outmoded conventions, I hope you will forgive me for resorting to



another, i.e. I feel obliged to define my terms, in order the better to determine if *I am Charlotte Simmons* actually contains potent academic satire. To echo what has already been asserted above for the sake of demonstrating that it applies to the current object text: academic satires are long works of narrative fiction set in the academic milieu, featuring primary characters drawn from that world: professors, students, bureaucrats and functionaries of various stripes. As satires, they may be distinguished from other works of campus or varsity fiction insofar as they, to borrow from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, boast the two fundamental components of satire: "Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack" (224). The latter is typically vice or folly, two terms that may be construed in myriad ways. For the purposes of this analysis, I wish to assert that the target of Wolfe's wit (such as it is) is vice of a very specific kind.

Indeed, *I am Charlotte Simmons* can be readily understood to be an attack upon *ressentiment* that reveals the considerable diagnostic power of Nietzsche's moral psychology. Ultimately I intend to argue that this hermeneutical strategy has not featured in any of the extant criticism of the novel and that said omission ought to be corrected. It is not sufficient merely to demonstrate that the novel can be read in this way; the more pressing question concerns the effectiveness of Wolfe's attack and in the last analysis I am prepared to concede that the attack misses the mark, though for





reasons that have little to do with the criticisms that have been leveled against it to date.

Evidence to the effect that Wolfe's novel is focused on the problematic implications of contemporary slave morality and *ressentiment* is easily located in the first chapter of this lengthy monograph. As the protagonist of the piece prepares to leave the rural backwater of Alleghany County, North Carolina, and soar into the academic Asgard of the fictional Dupont University (one could readily speculate about the link between the nomenclature, fruit and wealth, though the novel contains no attempts to fortify that link or to disclose itself as a clever *roman-à-clef*), where her innocent young genius will at last be free to flourish and thrive, she receives the following advice from her proud tutor, Miss Pennington, concerning the attitudes of some of her yahoo classmates:

Listen to me Charlotte. They're resentful—and they're attracted, intensely attracted. If you don't see that, I'm disappointed in you. And they went out and got drunk enough to make a spectacle of it. You remember we read about the German philosopher Nietzsche? He called people like that tarantulas. Their sole satisfaction is bringing down people above them, seeing the mighty fall. You'll find them everywhere you go, and you'll have to be able to recognize them for what they are (29).



The specific portion of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*—a volume that is like lightning in that it has the capacity to both burn and illuminate, as Walter Kaufmann's rendering of the subtitle makes plain: "A Book for All and None"—to which Charlotte's mentor refers is the seventh segment of the second part, aptly entitled (in the same translation) "On the Tarantulas." While it must be admitted that the concept of *ressentiment* is not exhaustively analyzed in this portion of the text, only indexed as a symptom of what Nietzsche described in *On the Genealogy of Morals* as, "The slave revolt in morality [that] begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge" (472), it is a provocative little parable nonetheless. In it, Zarathustra launches a barrage against his etymological enemies:

Thus I speak to you in a parable—you who make souls whirl, you preachers of *equality*. To me you are tarantulas, and secretly vengeful. But I shall bring your secrets to light: therefore I laugh in your faces with the laughter of the heights. Therefore I tear at your webs, that your rage may lure you out of your lie holes and your revenge may leap out from behind your word justice. *For that man may be delivered from revenge*, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 99).



The metaphor herein is rather transparent: these loathsome, poisonous insects are wriggling *ressentiment* made flesh. They incarnate that will to bring the lofty low that is at the root of slave morality. Rather than affirm the doctrine of eternal recurrence—what Bernd Magnus has discerningly dubbed the source of “meaning”<sup>19</sup>—in the spirit of *amor fati*, these preachers of equality want revenge against their betters and brood over that desire endlessly. Robert Solomon explains *ressentiment* in terms of a perfectly serviceable analogy<sup>20</sup>:

A simple but useful example of this particularly vicious unvirtuous aspect of resentment is a simple footrace. There are two ways of winning such a race. One is to run faster than everyone else and in doing so inspire those you beat to greater effort and faster speeds too. (It is not unusual, when a runner breaks a world record, for those behind her to clock their best ever times too, and sometimes even to break the old world record themselves [a fraction of a

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<sup>19</sup> Magnus has argued that Zarathustra’s doctrine of eternal recurrence “...might give one a sense of meaning in life” (Magnus 42). He makes this claim following a brief commentary on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, 13 (this segment is entitled *The Convalescent* in Kaufmann’s translation and appears on 215-221 in the edition mentioned in list of works cited appended to the present project. It is in this segment of the text that Zarathustra’s animal familiars explain that, if he did die, he would inevitably experience the same life again, not modified one iota, and that he ought to embrace this truth and live according to it). While I think this is certainly a salient passage, I would argue that *On the Vision and the Riddle* (III, ii) contains an even more elegant, life-affirming treatment of this idea: “Courage, however, is the best slayer—courage which attacks; which slays even death itself, for it says, Was *that* life? Well then! Once more!” (157). What is missed by many, including Wolfe and Allan Bloom, as I will argue shortly, is that Nietzsche’s work is *not* a vindication of relativistic nihilism but an attempt, especially in *Zarathustra*, to overcome it—crucially, given the importance of the study of literary narratives within the confines of this project, through *literature*.

<sup>20</sup> While the example that I have selected for inclusion here is more complete and enlightening than a previous illustration that appears in the same essay, I will have cause to turn back to the first of the two in due course, as it refers to the psychology of *ressentiment* as regards students’ attitudes toward grades, which could not be more useful. I mention this here only to anticipate any objection to leaping over what seems a more useful example to arrive at the one that follows this note instead.





second too late, however, to make it into the record books themselves].) The other way to win is to trip up your opponents, greasing the track, perhaps, and through your deceptive strategy degrade the race, demean the skill, and trade virtue for a cheap victory. It is clear what Nietzsche would object to here. If the moralist replies that the rules of morality are formulated precisely to prevent the strategy described here, the Nietzschean response is that the universal rules of morality are themselves just such a strategy, a strategy for inhibiting the best (210-211).

The last line is particularly telling (one could even argue that the illustration is so facile as to prohibit citation; my reply would be a new reading of a banal text, one that defamiliarizes cliché, is as prone to disturbing the comforted as it is to comforting the disturbed—and what else is writing for?) in that Solomon argues that slave morality has won the day: that a system of values designed to bring the powerful and the noble, the higher types, down into the hole with the cunning tarantulas has dominated Western civilization from the days of Socrates' wily orations<sup>21</sup> in the ancient *agora* to the present. A moral order that degrades and corrupts the best in order to insure that they will be the equals of the mediocre shapes our existence according to Charlotte's

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<sup>21</sup> Recall that Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates helped to lump him in with the Sophists; Nietzsche's quarrel with Socrates stems from his (Socrates') complicity in the project of denying the world and life in favor of otherworlds and afterworlds, metaphysical speculation about the soul and ideas, the triumph of dialectics over life-affirmation: "With Socrates Greek taste undergoes a change in favor of dialectics: what is really happening when that happens? It is above all the defeat of a *nobler* taste; with dialectics the rabble gets on top"(Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, 41). Interestingly, Bloom has argued that "...for those who wish to see, contemplation of Socrates is our most urgent task" (Bloom 312). The outcome of such contemplation, as this example makes plain, will not always be the vindication of the Socratic ideas Bloom claims to cleave close to!



tutor. Wolfe's novel is a protracted exercise in verifying that claim by carefully depicting the fictional world of Dupont University as a nest of tarantulas.

In that nest Charlotte Simmons encounters three characters who will vie for her affections: Hoyte Thorpe, a hedonistic frat boy to whom she is powerfully drawn despite herself; the laughably labeled Jojo Johanssen, the quintessential strapping meathead who plays center for Dupont's varsity basketball team; and Adam Gellin, an intellectually gifted, terribly frustrated student who esteems the life of the mind above all else, who would seem to be the perfect companion for Charlotte and yet fails to stir the kind of seething passion in her that Hoyt Thorpe effortlessly evokes. I will admit that all three are very familiar types (one cannot help but detect here the echo of the *commedia dell'arte*); seemingly the sort of clumsy caricature that has crowded campus fiction from its inception forward. Prya Jain sums up this reading of the novel adroitly:

The book is an amalgamation, of sorts, of "Animal House," "Revenge of the Nerds," "PCU" and "Old School," minus the comic pratfalls and with a heavy dose of angst. We get the "whining diversoids" turning every remark into an instance of sexism or racism, the thick-necked musclemen who live at the gym, the puking tailgaters and, most of all, the banal conversation stylings of party kids ("how-drunk-I-was stories, guy's-such-a-loser stories, can-you-believe-what-a-slut-she-is stories"). The action plays out through the scrim of



Wolfe's pet theory that social pressure trumps free will, and that in college, having sex is the greatest social pressure of all (Jain).

I will grant the truth of all of this as long as I may be permitted to take issue with the last claim. It is certainly the case that Wolfe's novels are usually driven by his "pet theory," but said theory has been modified in this instance in order to accommodate the moral and psychological implications of *ressentiment* already explicated above.

In fact, the three pivotal personages already identified here can be sorted into a hierarchy according to the customs and habits of college culture and simultaneously revealed as disclosing a specific aspect of the moral psychology of *ressentiment*, each in his own way. Jojo Johanssen moves through the rarified realm of varsity athletics—he is one of the ostensible overmen of the university, yet he comes perilously close to being expelled once he is caught in a flagrant act of plagiarism, abetted by the aforementioned cerebral fellow, his tutor, Adam Gellin. This attempt to circumnavigate a meritocratic scholarly culture (based, in part, on the *hubris* of a star athlete who is disdainful of the nerd who tutors him until he is apprehended) is symptomatic of a growing trend in the small world of academe beyond the pages of academic satire.

As Côté and Allahar have argued in their *Ivory Tower Blues*, trying to avoid grade inflation and teaching to the most talented students entail serious hazards in the contemporary university:



Readers may justifiably ask why professors do not simply teach to the bright students and maintain the integrity of their courses (teaching to the ‘top half’ of the class). Some do, as we have done, but it is usually done at one’s own peril because it usually means putting in an inordinate amount of time with students (a) who are unprepared for, or incapable of doing, higher level work (or what used to be standard university-level work), or (b) who have been conditioned to expect high grades for very little work [Jojo is an unhappy wedding, in his ponderous flesh, of the two!]. At the same time, these professors can develop reputations as being ‘unreasonable,’ receive poor teaching evaluations, and have to deal with student misbehavior ranging from passive aggressiveness in classes through to outright aggressiveness when students insist on higher grades or when they fill out course evaluations (35).

Jojo’s flouting of college standards and practices and his attempts to cajole and intimidate his instructors neatly reflect this growing culture of complaint, coercion, coddling and, very rarely, criminality:

Mr. Quat held the paper up in front of Jojo—there was no grade on it—and said, “Mr. Johanssen, is this your paper?”

“Yeah...”

“Did you write it yourself?”





Jojo could feel the blood draining from his face. It was all he could do to answer in a half-normal voice, “*Yeah*,” and arrange his eyes and lips in a fashion that registered astonishment over the very question.

“Well, then, perhaps you can tell me what this word means.” The professor was pointing at the word CATALYST.

Jojo panicked. He couldn’t *think*. His tutor had just *told* him the other night! (264).

Thus Jojo is apprehended, and his humiliation is indicative of the rather formidable challenges faced by an individual who is thrust into an intellectual environment for which he is manifestly unprepared. His attempt to deceive his instructor is woefully inept, yet he naively assumes that his celebrity will shield him, as he is no ordinary student.

Following this humiliation, Jojo has a most interesting encounter with Charlotte Simmons that reveals that despite his august stats in the minds of Dupont’s rank and file, he is in actuality a slave to the larger interests and appetites of the institution:

You know what liberal arts means?

Pause. Rumination. “...No.”

“It’s from the Latin?” Charlotte was the very picture of kind patience. “In Latin, *liber* means free? It also means book, but that’s just a coincidence [a deliberate attempt on Wolfe’s part, one might wonder, to employ Menippean



rhetorical tactics: is it not the case that, through the study of books—even books so widely pilloried as *I am Charlotte Simmons*, that one might gain some measure of freedom from herd psychology and *ressentiment*?], I think. Anyway, the Romans had slaves from all over the world, and some of the slaves were very bright, like the Greeks. The Romans would let the slaves get educated in all sorts of practical subjects like math, like engineering, so they could build things, like music so they could be entertainers? But only Roman citizens, the free people—*liber*—could take things like rhetoric and literature and history and theology and philosophy? Because they were the arts of persuasion—and they didn’t want the slaves to learn how to present arguments that might inspire them to rise up or something? So the ‘liberal’ arts are the arts of persuasion, and they didn’t want anybody but free citizens to know how to persuade people.”

Jojo looked at her with arched eyebrows. . . .”So that’s what we are—athletes—we’re like slaves (182).

Jojo is thus inspired to enroll in a course in Philosophy. So astounded by this development is Jojo’s coach that he subjects the earnest supplicant to a withering rhetorical blast: “The Age of Socrates... You simpleminded shit, I got news for you. As far as you’re concerned, THIS IS THE FUCKING AGE OF JOJO! You got it? YOU’RE HERE TO DO THINGS WITH A ROUND ORANGE BALL!” (190).



This episode is significant for several reasons. First, it indicates that the cultural norms of the academic small world spawn false consciousness, in that those who are supposedly possessed of influence and status are actually little more than muscle-bound mercenaries in thrall to the athletic program. It also confirms that realizing that one is, for all intents and purposes, a slave, breeds *ressentiment* and an appetite for revenge. To act virtuously, according to Zarathustra's remarks in *On the Virtuous*, would be to act with an aristocratic indifference to revenge and *ressentiment*, to "...be in your deed as the mother is in her child" (96), to act in a spirit of Dionysian life-affirmation. Jojo resents his status but he responds to it in a vengeful, resentful fashion; rather than become himself, he makes a pathetic attempt to become the doppelganger of Charlotte Simmons, one who possesses, at least by his dim lights, some of the requisite legerdemain that he so conspicuously lacks. He simply changes masters. Finally, the wrath of his nonplussed, enraged coach confirms that he—the coach—despises intellectuals and that he is vigorously opposed to any attempt on the part of his lumbering charge to slip the bonds of servitude and become who they are. Wolfe's set-piece is admittedly replete with stereotypes, but he employs them to good effect, in the sense that he convincingly contrives the machinations of this fictional world and, in doing so, lends credence to Nietzsche's moral theory.

Hoyt Thorpe is the prototypical frat boy; a charming rogue who believes that he is destined for greatness, "Traditions—the greatest—mischievous oddities passed





from generation to generation of...the best people! A small cloud formed—the rising number of academic geeks, book humpers, homosexuals, flute prodigies...Nonetheless! There's their Dupont, which is just a diploma with 'Dupont' written on it...and there's the real Dupont, which is ours!"(12). It is to this narcissistic, monomaniacal twit that Charlotte Simmons will ultimately surrender her virginity in an episode that is so lengthily, graphically repellent as to warrant the following critique by Blake Morrison:

Charlotte remains a coy cipher, Wolfe's vehicle for registering his affront at the sexualisation and the dumbing-down of university. In using her this way, he too exploits her—and there's something decidedly icky about the violation scene itself, where the point-of-view is supposed to be hers but feels like that of a voyeur-outsider. Smart as he is, Wolfe embeds a kind of self-critique in the text, by having a student feminist called Camille complain that men, when they talk about sex, fetishize female sexual innocence (Morrison).

Again, I will affirm that Wolfe is vulnerable to these charges. His omniscient narrator describes the defloration of his hapless heroine in as disquieting a fashion as is described above, so much so that *The Guardian* reported that Wolfe's novel secured the dubious honor of the Bad Sex Award:

As predicted in the Observer's review of the book last month, Tom Wolfe's latest novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (Jonathan Cape), has picked up this year's Literary Review Bad Sex award.



The annual prize is awarded to the worst description of sex in a contemporary novel. Wolfe triumphed with the following - edited - passage:

"Hoyt began moving his lips as if he were trying to suck the ice cream off the top of a cone without using his teeth ... Slither slither slither slither went the tongue, but the hand that was what she tried to concentrate on, the hand, since it has the entire terrain of her torso to explore and not just the otorhinolaryngological caverns..." (Pauli).

The diction in the closing line of this passage is weirdly aesculapian; after all, the term technically designates the cavities of the ears, nose and throat. What kind of odd erotic ministration involves the delicate probing of the nostrils?! Despite protestations on the part of the author that the sexual encounters in the novel were deliberately engineered to seem clinical and stilted so as to augment the impact of his satirical attack on the general hedonistic licentiousness of college culture, "Wolfe won the award for passages in his latest novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, the story of a naive girl who goes to college. But he insists that far from being a stranger to irony, it is the British judges who have missed the point. 'There's an old saying- you can lead a whore to culture but you can't make her sing {sic}' he told Reuters news agency. 'In this case you can lead an English literary wannabe to irony but you can't make him get it.'"(Writewords.org.uk) it is clear that the desired effect was not achieved.



Indeed, to characterize this situation in just those terms (*desired* effect) raises some crucial questions about the use of irony in satirical works that is relevant to understanding all of the object texts of this study, not Wolfe's alone. Linda Hutcheon has attempted to elucidate the complex nature of irony and its interpretation as follows in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*:

Some go even further to assert that irony not only works to point to the complexities of historical and social reality but also has the power to change that reality, at least for a time: 'During the revolutionary struggle irony is made welcome for its thrusts at the...enemy. Once the revolution is in the saddle, irony gets a prompt and dishonorable discharge. (D.J. Enright 1986: 108-9). Such a shift is only possible because of irony's transideological nature: while irony can be used to reinforce authority, it can also be used to oppositional and subversive ends—and it can become suspect for that very reason (29).

While this seems a vexing situation, it seems to me that the nature of irony can be much more easily grasped if an emphasis is placed on Hutcheon's characterization of it as a *means*, i.e. a mode or technique, a tool. If irony is understood to be a formal means of creating (or revealing) the tension between apparent and real or intended meaning, indeed, between appearance and reality per se, then it obviously follows that said tool can be appropriated in order to serve virtually any conceivable end—any end



that a being whose existence includes language and thought might pursue—regardless of its ideological orientation.

Wolfe has argued that he intended to satirize the empty, mechanical nature of the sexual experiences of college students. Allegedly, constructing a fictional world populated by individuals who become entangled in shallow, meaningless sexual relationships will have a revolutionary effect, to remain faithful to the language of the passage just cited from Hutcheon's study, insofar as it will reveal that their mode of comportment leads to suffering and a sterile, pathetic existence. It is important to note, however, that Wolfe's project has elicited responses of a very different sort, as is evidenced by the fact that this award has been bestowed upon the novel, as well as the mixed, ambivalent critical reception of the novel as a whole.

What this shows, albeit unsurprising, is something very useful for the pursuit of a fuller understanding of the nature and effects of academic satire. It is eminently possible for manner and matter to be confused, for authorial intentions (as if they can be decisively identified, even prior to the literal death of the author) to be misconstrued or ignored; for the fusion of form and content that *is* the text to yield unanticipated interpretations and subsequent modifications, however fleeting or ephemeral, of that matrix of nature and culture that is a human life-world—a socio-historical reality, to echo Hutcheon again. Wolfe could well have intended to satirize the sexual experiences of contemporary university students. Instead, he produced a





text that is so repulsive and clumsy that the work of interpretation is generally arrested at the literal level: the sentences themselves sicken the reader, such that their utility in the service of a larger satirical project is dramatically reduced, if not destroyed.

Two consequences (at least) come to the fore as this dilemma, faced by Wolfe, is read into the interpretation of works of academic satire—past, present and future. The apparent failure of Wolfe's attempt could be the result of ineptitude on the part of the author (the clear position of those who bestowed the award); it could be the result of interpretive ineptitude on the part of the reader(s) of his work (Wolfe's apparent position, given his remarks to journalists) or it could well be a synthesis of these alternatives whose specific manifestations are contextually contingent. To put the matter more simply: George W. Bush may well have missed the irony, but Linda Hutcheon could be the sort of ideal, insomniac reader, able to detect the irony Wolfe wove into the text.

To defer a more thorough treatment of this larger issue for the sake of drawing this analysis of Wolfe's novel to a close seems fitting at this juncture. It ought to be acknowledged that the individual who enters into this now infamous scene with Charlotte Simmons, Hoyt Thorpe, exhibits his *ressentiment* in the form of sloth, as he simultaneously revels in the moral and cultural status quo and exhibits a marked desire to reap the benefits thereof without effort. He ultimately engineers his own undoing by letting certain crucial facts about an incriminating episode he witnessed



slip into the hands of Adam Gellin, who writes a sensational article for the campus paper that catapults him from the nadir of desolation to national fame as a muckraking, yellow journalist. Hoyt's inability to strive for the success he so ravenously craves, his disdain for "book humpers" and his bad faith, send him plummeting from a plateau just beneath the one inhabited by Jojo and his ilk into social oblivion.

Adam Gellin is yet another type made manifest, boiling with *ressentiment* and desperate to supplant the Jojos and Hoyts of the world through the attainment of academic excellence and a bold career as a public intellectual. He expounds on this score to a startled Charlotte:

"Oh, yeah. Up 'til then, students like used to go to graduate school and become college teachers. But after that, a new kind of individual comes on the scene: the bad-ass. The bad-ass is a sort of rogue intellectual. A bad-ass doesn't want to do anything as boring and low-paid and like...codified...as teaching. The bad-ass types, they're the types who don't want to spend the prime of life as a graduate student cooped up in a cubicle up in the stacks of the library. You're an intellectual, but you want to operate on a higher level...like Chomsky" (256).



Fatuous silliness of this kind, appealing as it might be in its grandiloquence and naïveté, is not difficult to accept as the product of a resentful, lonely individual's ruminations about a dazzling future.

Moreover, as Paul Johnson has pointed out with a sort of iconoclastic glee in his study of Rousseau, Shelley, Marx, Ibsen and others—*The Intellectuals*—a combination of wild egotism and self-pity has marked many of the members of the class that Adam designates the “bad asses.”<sup>22</sup> One example that he cites comes from the correspondence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Behind the self-pity lay an overpowering egoism, a feeling that he was quite unlike other men, both in his sufferings and his qualities. He wrote: ‘What could your miseries have in common with mine? My situation is unique, unheard of since the beginning of time...’.” (Johnson 10) One need look no further than the protagonists of Roth’s *Indignation*, Amis’ *Lucky Jim* or, for that matter, so august a personage as the eponymous central figure of Goethe’s *Faust* for further confirmation of the ubiquity of this type: the thinker who is at once enraged by the relative obscurity he suffers in the midst of intellectual toil and intoxicated by fantasies of worldly action, fame and importance. Adam Gellin is more sympathetic than many characters of this kind because he yearns for the influence and reputation of a Jojo or a Hoyt but is

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<sup>22</sup> In the index of Johnson’s study, the list of entries devoted to giving an account of the egotism of intellectuals contains *thirty* entries, some of several pages’ duration; the number of entries devoted to the lack thereof, i.e. selflessness, modesty or humility is *one*. While this certainly reveals as much about the inclinations and appetites of the investigator as it does about the data he sifted through, I think this is a noteworthy indication of the tendency of prominent thinkers to exhibit this specific vice. Johnson’s study is thorough and extensively documented.





sufficiently astute—and ethically upright—to repudiate the dubious values they espouse<sup>23</sup>.

Charlotte herself, about whom these three characters orbit throughout this sprawling narrative, undergoes a quadripartite metamorphosis, a four part self-reinvention. She shifts from wide-eyed innocence to a brief flirtation with the thrill of experimenting with the pursuit of knowledge as autotelic, what one might characterize as the authentic life of the mind. She enrolls in a course in neuroscience<sup>24</sup> given by a Nobel laureate and absorbs large doses of genetic determinism and sociobiology, e.g. “—if there is such a thing as ‘you.’ I say ‘if,’ because the new generation of neuroscientists—and I enjoy staying in communication with them—believe Wilson [E.O. Wilson, author of *Consilience*] is a very cautious man. They laugh at the notion of free will” (283). Ideas of this kind have exercised Wolfe for some time<sup>25</sup> and Charlotte is both compelled and repulsed by their implications. She then embarks on

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<sup>23</sup> Given the fact that Gellin enjoys a meteoric rise because he writes frankly and provocatively about the small world of the institution as a mirror of the “irresistibly lurid carnival of American life,” which Kakutani quoted Wolfe exhorting young writers to do, it seems reasonable to infer that he sublimates his *ressentiment* in a way that is most consonant with Wolfe’s ideas, making him the unlikely hero of the piece despite his numerous flaws.

<sup>24</sup> The fact that Lodge, Wolfe and even Swift—consider the weird goings on in Lagado (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 95) to say nothing of C.P. Snow, are animated by fascination—and in some cases dismay—when the “two cultures” collide or enter into dialogical exchange is no accident in my view. This will be treated of in amore thorough and, I hope, spurring fashion in the conclusion of this project.

<sup>25</sup> In an essay entitled “Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died.” (OrthodoxyToday.com) Wolfe argues that Wilson’s sociobiological ideas, combined with contemporary technology and scientific research, have effectively killed the ancient metaphysical conceit of the self. I will take up that theme again at the end of this project.



the disastrous affair with Hoyt and finally, improbably, leaps into the arms of the athlete cum philosopher, Jojo.

What is most disappointing about Charlotte's exploits in the course of this *bildungsroman* is the sorry fact that she is finally drawn back from utter ruin by a return to old-fashioned Christian morality—or a patina thereof disguising conventional bourgeois ambition and materialism—rather than some epiphany regarding the vacuity of slave morality. Her parents in the Blue Ridge Mountains remain symbols of unbending moral rectitude and she decides to abandon her dalliance with the frat boy and attendant misadventures because, “Momma had always held up the cross to lies, and they always died in that merciless, unforgiving light” (661). Wolfe may be said, then, to have betrayed the principles that were so clearly embraced at the novel's outset. It is in this spirit that I argued to begin with that Wolfe's intentions—here the diction can be modulated so as to avoid offending any delicate theoretical sensibilities: Wolfe's *work*—seemed to have the potential to produce that kind of delicate balance of order and chaos that distinguishes the strongest satire, that instantiates the earthly, central element of Bosch's triptych, to refer back to Haidt and Graham's research concerning moral intuitions. Unfortunately, the novel closes with a retreat into banality.

One of the most telling defects in any literary artifact (particularly in any work that is identified as satire) is that moment at which it betrays itself, at which the



apparent target of the wit is missed. To employ a potentially objectionable Aristotelian metaphysical term of art, this could be identified as the work's *telos*, which is missed—this is the etymological root, after all, of *hamartia*<sup>26</sup>--with catastrophic results. *I am Charlotte Simmons* seemed to be a scathing satirical attack on slave morality and *ressentiment* that might have culminated in the invention of new values, the abandonment of customary, habitual thinking and acting in favor of, for example, a further examination of the implications of the crude determinism espoused by reductive neuroscience, or even an attempt to see its implications, more fully considered, through.

Instead, Wolfe's novel apologizes for the sort of individual that Nietzsche anticipated in the closing lines of *On the Tarantulas*: "Some preach my doctrine of life and are at the same time preachers of equality and tarantulas. Although they are sitting in their holes, these poisonous spiders, with their backs turned on life, they speak in favor of life, but only because they wish to hurt. They wish to hurt those who now have power, for among these, the preaching of death is still most at home" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 101). Wolfe's protagonist finds the ethos of the

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<sup>26</sup> "*Hamartia* means originally a 'bad shot' or 'error,' but is currently used for 'offense' or 'sin.' Aristotle clearly means that the hero is a great man with 'something wrong' in his life or character; but I think it is a mistake of method to argue whether he means an 'intellectual error' or 'a moral flaw.' The word is not so precise" (Cooper 6). Emphasizing the elasticity of the term is warranted, *pace* Martha Husain's account in *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's Poetics*, in which she asserts that, "The error (*hamartia*), which does play a causal role (*di' hamartian*) is neither linked to moral character (*ethos*) nor with articulated rationality (*dianoia*) but is itself an action and therefore part of the *mythos*" (62). This account helps to demystify the concept: *hamartia* indexes an *act*, not a thought or moral failing. It is this kind of missing of the mark that makes the fate of *I am Charlotte Simmons* tragic.



tarantulas distasteful and the novel offered a satirical rebuke to it at first, yet finally affirms convention.

## Ha Jin

*The Crazy* can be numbered amongst academic satires, particularly those that focus on the perspective of the student, for many reasons: 1. the unfolding action is set primarily within the confines of a Chinese university in Shanning (5). 2. the central characters are a professor and his student, the second party serving simultaneously as the narrator and protagonist of the novel. 3. the novel contains a withering assault upon the petty ironies and illusions of academic life that is more caustic than comic, nevertheless qualifying it as a work that is written primarily in the satirical mode. In addition, it offers up an account of the history, politics and psychology of Mao's Cultural Revolution and, in its twilight (the novel, not the historical/political phenomenon) the Tianamen Square uprising. Ha Jin's novel allows the reader to vicariously unlock the dreadful details of these powerfully charged episodes in Chinese history with the mind of a graduate student whose mentor, a distinguished professor of literature who suffers a crippling stroke, carries the map of the period in his tortured soul.

The professor in question, Mr. Yang, slips in and out of lucidity for the duration of the narrative; in doing so, he functions metonymically: he incarnates the bifurcated condition of a national consciousness struggling to balance two





contradictory enterprises: the effort to sanitize or obliterate those fractions of its past that cannot be reconciled with its present and the attempt to cleave close to the political, cultural and philosophical traces of a largely imaginary, ideal past that will serve as the model for a modern future. This will undoubtedly sound eerily reminiscent of the conflict between the Right and Wrong arguments in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

Moreover, as is particularly germane to the present argument, Mr. Yang's tendency to disregard protocol and *politesse* in the grip of his madness precipitates some shocking revelations about the grim facts of Chinese academic life that perforate Jian's resolve. He is the aforementioned graduate student who is bound to Mr. Yang by both professional obligation and filial piety as the latter's son-in-law to be: "To be honest, I felt obligated to attend my teacher. Even without my engagement to his daughter, I'd have done it willingly, just out of gratitude and respect. For almost two years he had taught me individually, discussing classical poetry and poetics with me almost every Saturday afternoon, selecting books for me to read, directing my master's thesis and correcting my papers for publication"(5-6). When the novel begins, he is full of naïve optimism concerning his career prospects. When Mr. Yang cries, in a hallucinatory fit:

People who don't care a damn about poetry live well and wallow in bliss and comfort. One of my former classmates, who is a nincompoop specializing



only in licking his superiors' assholes, was appointed a minister in the State Council two years ago. He has so much power that he had a swimming pool constructed for himself, as easy as ordering a dish. But we, wretched scholars and fainthearted bookworms, have lain in word-hoards, feeding on paper and ink, believing in poetry, and dreaming of miracles. We are all fools! (136).

Jian cannot help but begin to confront the gulf between his aspirations and his guide's dreadful rants. Despite the mitigating influence of his obvious illness, Mr. Yang continues to enjoy the respect and authority afforded his former, mild-mannered and sagacious self. "He was the best teacher I'd ever had, knowledgeable about the field of poetics and devoted to his students. Some of my fellow graduate students felt uncomfortable having him as their adviser. "He's too demanding," they would say. But I enjoyed working with him" (6). As a result, Jian cannot simply dismiss his diatribes as demented nonsense, nor can he return to the relative safety and comfort of his accustomed routine. He is forced to reflect upon the ironic tension between the life he believed he was leading and the ugliness of his mentor's raw thoughts, hurled as they are into his student's mind without the softening influence of a clear and conscientiousness consciousness. The results, as I indicated above, are tragic insofar as Jian abandons his academic life and contemplates exile abroad: "If need be, I would attempt to swim across the shark-infested water. I was a good swimmer and with luck should be able to make it. From Hong Kong I would go to another country—Canada, or the United States, or Australia, or some place in Southeast Asia



where Chinese is widely used” (322). Of course, the contemplation of exile clearly dovetails with Ha Jin’s own status as a Chinese academic and author who lives in the United States but situates this narrative in the past of his native country.

It might be argued that, as a result of the fact that Ha Jin wrote this piece in English while living in the United States, it somehow fails to qualify as authentic Chinese literature. Laifong Leung’s research seemingly provides support for such a judgment:

In November 2002, when I began gathering materials for this chapter, I wanted to know if there had been any change in the attitude towards literature not written in Chinese by Overseas Chinese. The answer I received from a young scholar of the Chinese Academy of Social Services was: “In discussions concerning the belongingness of literature not written in Chinese by Overseas Chinese, the conclusion reached by Chinese scholars was that it should be considered foreign literature” (Laifong Leung 119).

However, this is somewhat complicated by Laifong Leung’s subsequent commentary. Bearing certain salient considerations in mind, including the fact that, “...mainland Chinese scholars tend to say that not many people in mainland China know foreign languages. This, too, cannot be an excuse. One only needs to look at how many scholars in the foreign literature division in every provincial academy of social sciences [sic] and how many foreign language departments exist in universities





throughout the nation” (125), it becomes clear that the scholarly consensus with respect to foreign language mastery and appreciation misses the mark; so too do the perceptions of the Chinese academy with respect to the thematic, historical and linguistic foreignness of works of literature written by overseas authors.

Nevertheless, the impressions and arguments of Laifong Leung, valuable as they may be, have limited potential radically to alter the *sensus communis* of modern Chinese academics. What this situation reveals is the mimetic success of Ha Jin’s fiction: the world he represents is one in which two widely divergent narratives concerning Chinese cultural history, two versions of the story of life in contemporary China, indeed *two minds* are at war for sovereignty in the complex contest to characterize and delimit authentic Chinese identity. Mr. Yang’s predicament is excruciating for just this reason, as is the dilemma faced by his protégé:

“Shut up!” I yelled with a shudder. He was pathetic. He had forgotten that he himself used to be maltreated as one of those so-called class enemies.

Oppressed for decades, now he dreamed of ruling others. He didn’t know who he was anymore. I rushed to him, seized the newspaper, threw it on the floor, and stamped on it. (101)

Jian is caught between being the loyal acolyte of the man Mr. Yang once was and the nonplussed observer of the wild, erratic, occasionally inspired but generally



incoherent individual that he has become. He carefully chronicles Mr. Yang's suffering during the Cultural Revolution:

During the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Yang had been paraded through campus as a Demon-Monster once a week for more than half a year; if he had survived that kind of torment, a few skirmishes with a colleague shouldn't have driven him out of his mind (42).

In fact, it was against exactly this background that Mr. Yang's occasional, deluded recitation of party chants and slogans or vain fantasies of dictatorial power appeared in such galling relief, enraging Jian in the episode mentioned above, for example. The account of the shattering effects of the Cultural Revolution, on Mr. Yang in particular and China as a whole (with an emphasis on the specific malice toward scholars and intellectuals like Mr. Yang) is certainly consistent with the history of the Cultural Revolution. As Friedman et al relate:

Nankai faculty were beaten and publicly reviled. Some were murdered. Factory workers were encouraged to seize the homes of "black" teachers and kick the stinking struggle objects out of residences superior to those of proletarians. Many faculty families were left homeless. Strangers walked into a home at any hour, took what they wanted, and vandalized what they chose not to take. Intellectuals were targets of a continuous *kristallnacht*, with theft, terror and thuggery called revolution (Friedman et al, 86).



To add to this grisly scene, it is worth noting that Mao's anti-intellectual biases and loathing for scholars persisted unabated well after the monstrous heights of the Cultural Revolution had been reached:

The older Mao got, the more he believed in the conscious will of man, even as his hatred grew for the schools whose task it was to cultivate that conscious will. "The more books one reads," he allowed himself to say, "the more stupid one becomes." He belittled professors. He told students to sleep during class and cheat on exams. He sent writers to grow rice in remote villages [...]

"Even if ten thousand schools of law and political science had been opened," he exulted in his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, "could they have brought as much political education to the people, men and women, young and old, all the way into the remotest corners of the countryside, as the peasant associations have done in so short a time? I don't think they could" (437).

Unlike many of the works considered in these pages, *The Crazy* seeks to show that the lives of scholars, intellectuals and students are not exclusively subject to the flaws and foibles of their own natures and the familiar bailiwick of the academy. Under the circumstances that are briefly glossed above, it is clear that the satirist's task becomes more challenging and ethically weighty. Not only is Ha Jin's novel rich in insights that are consonant with those of Tartt, Wolfe and Roth (relatively impoverished as the



latter may be by comparison) but it also treats of a matrix of political and cultural forces that made the world beyond the academy as hostile to its inhabitants as is conceivable. Other moments of this kind have certainly coalesced (the use of the term *kristallnacht* in Friedman's account signals but one of a host of analogous, agonizing chapters in the chronicle of dictatorial devilry directed against the scholar and free-thinker) but Ha Jin has supplied a treatment of such a moment that neither cheapens nor distorts the historical realities, even as it contains ample evidence of the reluctance of the chronicler to err on the opposite side of the matter and indulge in some hagiographical exaggeration of the purity and sanctity of the academic realm. Verisimilitude and satirical vigor are shown by this and other examples—Coetzee comes to mind instantly, of course—to be far from mutually exclusive.

Several observations made by Jian indicate that dissimulation and political maneuvering are as characteristic of the Chinese academy as they are of its analogs elsewhere. In the course of a conversation with Nurse Chen, who cares for Mr. Yang, a seemingly innocuous display of erudition on Jian's part occasions some self-deprecating reflection within the narrator's transparent mind:

“Was it like this, ‘*Wer, wenn ich schreie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?*’” She shook her head in amazement, then giggled [...] Her praise embarrassed me a little, for that line was the only part of the long poem I had memorized. We often committed a passage or a few lines to memory not only





because we liked them but also because we could impress others with them.

That's one of the tricks of the academic game (47).

The use of this sort of beguiling technique might strike one as harmless, save for Jian's interpretation of his own act. Increasingly, as the novel accelerates toward its conclusion, he becomes more and more thoroughly cognizant of the carefully maintained personae that conceal the true natures of those around him from students and colleagues, even as he apes this deceptive practice himself and castigates himself for his hypocrisy. The situation is compounded and intensified, of course, by the turbulent political climate generated at the time by mounting political protests, which culminated in the Tiananmen Square mayhem.

Like many at the time<sup>27</sup>, Jian is only dimly aware of the increasing intensity of student and labor unrest, having been kept abreast of developments by occasional letters from Meimei, his fiancée and the daughter of Mr. Yang, who is studying in Beijing (53). Once the government chooses direct, violent action to do away with the protests, the novel reveals two stark alternatives that will be familiar given Bloom's

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<sup>27</sup> The rapid about-face of the Deng Xiaoping regime regarding the Tiananmen Square protests is vividly recounted in David S.G. Goodman's *Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution: a Political Biography*. Goodman avers: "Moreover, the longer the protests continued without state intervention, the more other people became convinced that their participation was at least officially sanctioned. If that were the case, then such equanimity would have been rudely awakened by the editorial in *The People's Daily* on 26 April which was heavily critical of the demonstrations and described them as 'a planned conspiracy to plunge the whole country into chaos.' From the available evidence, it would appear that Deng played a central role in the decision to take a hard line against the demonstrators" (108-109). So vital to the sudden change in the tone of discourse about the protests was this editorial that Ha Jin sees fit to cite it in the novel (109) and it is after this point in the plot that Tiananmen and its reverberations eclipse the other elements that drive the plot.



account of student reactions to the protests in America during the 1960s: at first, Jian and his colleagues try to carry on with their ordinary lives, pre-occupied by examinations and careerism, until it becomes clear that the relative tranquility of the campus is in jeopardy: “You folks are disgusting!” Mantao said to me and spat on the concrete floor. “The People’s Army’s tanks have rolled into Beijing ready to attack the students, but you’re still going to hold the dance party this evening” (286).

Although Mantao is simply another graduate student airing his disdain for the detachment of his colleagues, the sentiment does have a palpable impact on Jian. The idea that he might *look down* (to borrow Bloom’s carefully emphasized phrase) on the conflict in Tiananmen Square is more than he can bear, and his decision to go to Beijing and try to support his fellow students is made shortly hereafter (295). The fact that his mentor is deceased by the time this crux of the plot is reached is obviously crucial; so too is the fact that his fiancée has become enamored of a young scholar with a more promising career than his own (292) thanks to ubiquitous nepotism. After he witnesses the violence and chaos in Tiananmen, Jian elects to abandon academic life and flee to Hong Kong. Jian’s decision is not informed by a Faustian appetite for the fruit of the golden tree of experience as opposed to the grey tree of theory; he sees the tree of life in flames and decides to seek more verdant terrain elsewhere.



Prior to his death, Professor Yang modulated his accustomed, frothing rants and lapsed into his erstwhile idiom, discoursing in his sickroom on the characteristic features of Chinese lyric poetry:

In Chinese culture, poetry liberates and sustains the self despite the fact that the self is constantly under the over-whelming pressure of the community. Thus Chinese poets tend to speak as themselves, too earnest to worry about having a characterized voice to conceal their own—they desperately need the genuine self-expression in poetic articulation. In other words, the self is liberated in poetic speech, which is essentially cathartic to the Chinese poet (129).

Though they combine to form the verdict of a mad mentor, these words have a powerful impact on Jian that could not have been anticipated had they been uttered in the serene atmosphere of a lecture hall by a professor at the height of his powers. Professor Yang is in tatters: a fragile and fractured self. Ironically, it would seem that his devotion to literary scholarship—in the specific world of Chinese academe—has brought about his madness. When he chooses exile over the pursuit of the same path, Jian has decided to preserve his integrity rather than succumb to the pressures of the community and the conflicting desires to act for the betterment of Chinese society on the one hand and pursue a fruitful, ambitious career as an academic on the other.



It is in this sense that *The Crazyed* reveals just how complex and contradictory the relationship between mentor and student, the master and the acolyte or *akolouthos* as opposed to the anacoluthon, “a sentence or construction lacking grammatical sequence”(Holden 5) can be. Jacques Derrida’s remarks on this score are extremely illuminating, both with regard to Jian’s relationship with Mr. Yang and the relationship between teacher and student in academic satires at large:

I often repeat that my relation to the masters that you mentioned—Freud, Heidegger—is a relation of fidelity and betrayal; and I betray them because I want to be true to them. In reading Freud and many others I try not to betray them; I try to understand what they mean and to do justice to what they write and to follow, to follow them as far as possible and as closely as possible, up to a certain point. When I say ‘up to a certain point’ I mean that there is a moment that I betray them. *Within* the experience of following them there is something other, something new, or something different which occurs and which I sign. That’s what I call a ‘counter-sign’, a counter-signature, a term I use very often. A counter-signature is a signature which both confirms the first signature, the former signature, and nevertheless is opposed to it; and in any case it’s new, it’s my own signature. A counter-signature is this strange alliance between following and not following, confirming and displacing; and displacing is the only way to pay homage, to do justice. If I just repeat, if I interpret ‘following’ as just repetition, following in a way, in a mechanical





way, just repeating, not animating, it's another way of betraying. So, if I want to follow, I have to hear (Derrida 10).

I believe this concept of the counter-signature has enormous potential to lay bare the challenge presented to Jian, to the students of Julian in Tarrt's *The Secret History*, to Charlotte Simmons. To follow by not following, to abandon the logical principle of the excluded middle and enact a willful contradiction is to distinguish the acolyte from the master, to betray for the sake of following, to abandon mere repetition in order to introduce that third element that amounts at once to paying homage to the master and emerging oneself as a discrete and autonomous subject, that courageous self that speaks in Chinese lyric poetry as Mr. Yang interpreted it above.

When mere repetition substitutes for the emergence of the counter-sign, satire unleashes all of its scorn and invective: Jojo Johanssen is humiliated; Charlotte Simmons suffers the grotesque attentions of Hoyte Thorpe; Jian is conflicted and tortured. Only the emergence of that third element between the obedient parrot and the utter traitor fulfills the potential of the Thinkery and holds out the promise of freedom. When Jian leaves Chinese academe behind, he is not utterly betraying Mr. Yang; he is, instead, hearing him (and the Chinese lyric poetry he so enthusiastically espoused in his lucid moments) and actively deciding to escape the fate that he (Mr. Yang) suffered. By failing to become his master's double, Jian remains faithful to him in a way that transcends the dyad. This harks back too to Zapp's test of genuine



understanding in the Rumbridge lecture that is cited above: if I repeat your words verbatim, I testify only to recollection, not to understanding, to knowing myself and creating something new.

Thus each of these novels, albeit in very different ways within the confines of their respective narrative worlds, discloses the hazards of mere repetition, ridicules and reviles them and advocates the emergence of the third, the contradictory but nevertheless vital unity of the *akolouthos* and the anacoluthon: doing justice through betrayal. To echo Derrida again on just this theme: “Perjury is part of it, part of fidelity. That may sound paradoxical or tragic but I think this is necessity; of necessity you can’t avoid perjury. This means that the *acolutia* and the analocuthon are not opposed” (Derrida 12). When Julian’s students fail to appreciate his fascination with Dionysian liberty in the context of his equally enthusiastic endorsement of reason, when they blithely repeat without betrayal, they are doomed. When Charlotte Simmons, having rejected the opportunity to betray for the sake of fidelity to the Nietzschean iconoclasm she has tasted, returns to the blithe repetition of Christian platitudes, she is made laughable in a way that even Wolfe seems not to have anticipated; when Jian abandons the life his master envisioned for him in an effort to remain faithful to the most exquisite and dangerous element of lyric poetry disclosed by his master’s own lights, he betrays for the sake of faith: he hears. He merits compassion in this moment; his decision is the synthesis of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*: his character has been irrevocably altered by his study of classical



poetics, insofar as the mad Mr. Yang and the sane Mr. Yang have functioned in harmony, albeit unwittingly, to increase his knowledge and bestow upon him the uncanny ethical responsibility to betray for the sake of fidelity.

## Roth

*Indignation* is an insipid novel, eerily reminiscent of Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*, yet another attempt on the part of a gray literary eminence to engage in literary empathetic imaginative projection that ends not in profound insight or wrenching nostalgia but dumb depravity and resentment. The most crucial episodes in this novel are two: a moment of furtive fellatio (54) and a panty raid (202). Mercifully, Marcus Messner, the protagonist immersed in and narrating these events, is an active participant in but one of these phenomena: the first. The second is more crucial to his destiny, one is left to infer, because shortly after the campus chaos that it precipitates, Messner is caught in the bloody net of conscription and slashed to ribbons by a Communist bayonet on Massacre Mountain--as the grunts dub it--in Korea (226).

Marcus tells his tale from some dreadful limbo of an afterworld in which anamnesis is all: he can only rehearse the painful details of his life again and again for eternity (55). As a free-floating, conflicted cogito, he vividly recollects his idyllic Newark boyhood, his father's power and paternal benevolence and his mother's quiet strength; his embarrassment at having to hose the blood from the trash cans outside



his father's kosher butcher shop while desirable young women looked on from a passing school bus; his tireless devotion to his studies and his inability to abide the petty folly of the other humans. Marcus is a driven, impatient, indignant young man. Such creatures are as common as dust and Roth gives us no reason to become more interested in the life of his protagonist than we would be in the possibility that what he used to consist of might stop a wine barrel or fill a hole in a wall. Roth tries, as Hitchens has pointed out in the pages of *The Atlantic*<sup>28</sup>, to give this tale more heft and haunting historical meaning but fails in the attempt. Like Wolfe, he seems unable to conjure anything when scrying in the pool of youth and education apart from fumbling erotic desire and disdain for the world and its denizens. These parts of youth, commonplace as they may be, are not redeemed by that quality alone. If this is all one can recall when dwindling into the truth—forbidden fondling and supercilious solipsism—what use the intervening years? Academic novels that are written from the pupil's perspective can be great: look to Ha Jin or Donna Tartt for hope and pass these sperm sodden sock stories by.

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<sup>28</sup> Hitchen's review is scathing—its title suffices as a summary: of the article, the novel, and Hitchens: "Nasty, Brutish and Short."





### Chapter III: Teachers

“No doubt it’s the teacher’s fault that our young Arcadian bumpkin feels not a spark  
of intellectual power in his skull...”

--Juvenal, *Satire VII: The Plight of Intellectuals*

#### Amis

*Lucky Jim* is widely considered to be the urtext of the contemporary academic novel and its status as a satirical treatment of the same small world is similarly seminal. The world that it conjures is by no means characterized by vaulting idealism or an urgent will to rescue what is best and most valuable in academic life from decadence and corruption. Instead, Kingsley Amis has offered the reader access to a *Lebenswelt* that is primarily characterized by frustration, impotence, misanthropy and snobbery. The eponymous protagonist spends most of the rather shallow arc of the plot dodging his modest responsibilities, drinking, smoking, parading a vast array of odd facial contortions and cursing the fate of the impoverished scholarly underling. He is as resentful and angry, as petulant and sore as the nomenclature attached to the movement Amis started—the “angry young men” phase of British popular fiction—would naturally incline one to infer. What is most compelling about the novel given the trajectory of this study is not simply its auspicious genealogical position; it is the fact that this novel captures, with wit and precision, just how great the tension between the ideal and the real can be. If the tripartite schema derived from Haidt’s



moral psychology can be usefully mapped onto the etiological and interpretive terrain I have sought to scan herein, it will show that *Lucky Jim* makes of the red bricks of a British college the stuff of a purgatorial realm that verges on the infernal, the zone of entropy and madness that Dixon so often reels into, only to regain a precarious stance that is, in the majority of cases, a sardonic pose.

To confirm the centrality of the novel to contemporary academic satire, one need only refer to Mary Evans' recent *Killing Thinking* (2004), in which she avers: "The most famous satire of university life which has been published in Britain, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, was set in one of those red-brick universities in which there was little that was either socially or intellectually distinguished" (5). Dixon is an individual thoroughly out of his element in terms of class, culture, ethics and psychology. What those around him venerate and admire, he disdains; what those around him consider with leaden seriousness, he greets with sneers and grimaces. In the words of Elaine Showalter's aforementioned *Faculty Towers*:

Moreover, whereas *The Masters* [not treated herein by virtue of the fact that it cannot be described as a satirical attack on the academy but a chronicle of the quest to triumph within it] is about staying on forever, *Lucky Jim* is about moving on. Whereas the masters are sure that they are at the very center of the universe, Jim is suffused with longing for a world elsewhere. And it is definitely not the world of Oxbridge...Jim wants to be in the city, in a magical city that is the opposite of the university, and he does finally leave, in a



triumphantly comic conclusion. Just as *The Masters* appeals to and addresses that side of the academic psyche that idealizes the ivory tower, *Lucky Jim* speaks to the academic spirit of rebellion and impatience, the feeling that life must be lived more intensely outside the walls (23).

It is certainly the case that Jim Dixon craves a speedy egress from the vaunted groves of academe throughout his sad, surly sojourn within them but it would be a mistake to infer that this is an entirely fresh idea. To proceed with greater precision: it is the case that Amis' novel marks a new and iconoclastic shift in British writing about the academy and about British life at large<sup>29</sup> in popular fiction. It is decidedly *not* the case, though, that the belief that a more vibrant, authentic, delectable life of action lies beyond the dreary dust and drudgery of the pondertorium or thinkery. Consider Goethe's *Faust* in this regard, or Zarathustra's contempt for the tarantulas.

All of these minds identify that primordial impulse to throw off the yoke of power, to reject conventional ideas and antique values and forge new ideas in a smithy largely fueled by anger and indignation. It is important to emphasize this point

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the origins of "angry young man" fiction in Britain, *vide* Randall Stevenson's *The British Novel since the 1930's* (1986, pp. 124) and Frederick Robert Card's *The Contemporary English Novel* (1962, pp. 220) for a start. In *Safire's Political Dictionary*, the iconic conservative journalist and public intellectual explains: "The *anger* in the phrase has been popularized by British dramatist John Osborne, whose 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* articulated a restlessness and disgust, a rebellion against 'old boy' philosophy prevalent in British politics and business where young men were trained for careers that they later rejected or that the "Establishment" did not permit them to pursue" (20). As I have tried to argue herein, while the fact that this movement signaled a rebellion against traditional mores and the hierarchical class structure of Britain, there is a certain perennial synonymy of youth and anger that each epoch speaks to in its own specific idiom. Though this fact oughtn't to render the matter trivial, it ought to immunize the careful analyst against branding as boldly unique what turns out to be, paradoxically, traditional iconoclasm, from Pheidippides to Jim Dixon to Hynes' Nelson Humboldt.



because, when it is made manifest in the context of academic satires like *Lucky Jim*, it punctures the myth that the satirist is primarily a *conservative* figure, seeking to protect order from entropy, the established order from the threat of chaos. Instead, this self-same literary modality can serve as an instrument of innovation or, as in the case of Jim Dixon's wild, inebriated attack (222-227)—note that it is eminently Menippean in tone and technique, such that Dixon, almost a man possessed by a Dionysian, mocking spirit, uses the idiomatic expressions, the accent and diction of Welch or the college Principal to ironically undermine and ridicule the very substance of his own hastily prepared, preposterous prattle. At the literal level, the lecture might read as a defense of conservative sensibilities, redolent of nostalgia for an older, simpler England. The attentive reader of *Lucky Jim* knows, though, that Dixon believes that "Merrie England" to be a silly fantasy, a utopian delusion that *belongs* in the winding sheet of oblivion. He is very much an incarnation of the Aristophanic Wrong Argument. The tension between manner and matter in the address perfectly corresponds to the tension within Dixon himself: he has given the lecture because he *must*; he has filled it with quaint recollection and a blustering Tory malaise in the face of modernity in order to play the fawning sycophant and ingratiate himself to Welch and the other powerful figures in attendance, whose collective will determines his professional destiny; in truth, however, he loathes them and the institution they run—he wants to survive, and is perhaps too lazy and lacking in imagination to devise another way of doing so, but like Goethe's romantic icon he is a pugilist, a clenched





fist of rage, who would replace the word with the act, and feel more at ease in a brawl than a lecture hall.

It is possible to locate Dixon at one pole and an individual like Nelson Humboldt at the other on that sinewy Phlegethon that they float upon, a river of rage and rancor at the world of academe as it is, with the protagonist of Ha Jin's *The Crazy*, Jian Wan, between them. Dixon has no idealism to lose—he is deeply skeptical about academe from the outset. Humboldt is a naïve idealist when his career begins and is slowly twisted into a very different posture by the machinery of the college, only to find himself revitalized and freshly optimistic, albeit in eminently terrestrial terms, rather than harboring heavenly hopes like the lyric 'I' whose words his father etched, lapidary, onto the surface of his young mind. Jian Wan follows the same trajectory as Humboldt but it ends in entropy—he has further to plunge than Dixon and does no climbing in the end, marking this novel as ambivalent in terms of its plot, with the satirical mode employed within the confines of that formal structure. Jian's life will pursue an indeterminate trajectory; Dixon is afforded a comic, *deus ex machina* escape (234). Both of the former novels have a comic plot, though the definition of paradise changes in each case: Humboldt finds a more humble haunt in which to ply his trade, simply thinking and talking and teaching as the gifted and enthusiastic *amateur* that he is; Dixon makes a Menippean mess of his address but is only too happy in the last analysis to leap over the walls of the academy, or be tossed, mugging and laughing.



## Nabokov

*Pnin* is a very charming, strange novel. Nabokov's characteristic formal play and ingenious linguistic dexterity are fully mustered, as is a wry, smirking sense of humour that is subtly distinct from the wit his various narrators display elsewhere. The fascinating Russian lecturer who is ultimately revealed as the focalizer--to adopt some narratological terminology that might make the narrator wince--is capable of remarkably nuanced aesthetic judgment and is consistently awed by mundane scenes in a way that Nabokov's prose renders contagious.

For example, he [the narrator] observes, after all of the potential observers who inhabit the fictional world of the text of the scene have vanished, and his narrator's eye is the only one fixed on the seemingly innocuous scene: "Presently all were asleep again. It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags" (110). This anticipates much of Nabokov's later work and, in a sense, reveals that something very intricate is underway in much of his fiction (consider the short story "Signs & Symbols" in this same vein, or the poetry of Shade in *Pale Fire*): Nabokov uses both free indirect discourse and first person narration to good effect in order to variously invite us into the mind of a staggeringly gifted artist (Pnin's son in this novel, for example, has a way of pondering the world that shows that he could well develop into the most



important painter of his generation); to consider the nature of genius as a theme and to watch a literary virtuoso of the rarest kind--Nabokov himself--at work.

*Pnin* is the tale of a highly eccentric professor who reels awkwardly through a teaching career that he finally abandons rather than accept the benevolence of a perceived rival (the aforementioned fascinating lecturer). Nabokov ruthlessly satirizes academic life by revealing the extent to which it flummoxes, fulfills and frustrates the eponymous protagonist by turns. One of the finest attacks on those who are too fond of relaxed, convivial classroom chat as a pedagogical technique ever launched appears herein: "Tom thinks that the best method of teaching anything is to rely on discussion in class, which means letting twenty young blockheads and two cocky neurotics discuss for fifty minutes something that neither their teacher nor they know" (161). Simply for the sake of savoring satirical salvos of this caliber, together with poor Pnin's silly antics and wild abuse of the various languages he knows--at one point he is alleged to have asserted that he was "shot" rather than fired, and because of his accent refers to a colleague's wife Joan as what sounds like "John,"--Pnin merits attention and admiration.



## Lodge

David Lodge is a pivotal figure in the history of the academic novel and, more specifically, academic satire. His unique contributions to the theory and practice of writing texts of this nature ought to be recognized and lauded, not only because of the aesthetic and technical merits of his works but also because of the remarkable insights into the complex machinations of university culture and the relationship between academe and other worlds, as it were, that his works contain. Simply by virtue of the number of academic novels that he has produced and the popular and critical adulation that these works have secured, Lodge is a widely acknowledged giant in the field. Writing of Lodge's works *prior* to the publication of one of his recent efforts in this literary realm, *Thinks...*, Bruce K. Martin asserts:

Today he [Lodge] has few serious rivals for the generally middle-class, college-educated readership to which his fiction seems to appeal most, and especially for those readers at all aware of developments in humanistic disciplines during recent decades. This is not to say that the readership with which Lodge has found favor is solely an academic one. Rather, those of his novels that first gained wide attention and that continue to be his best known—*Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1985), and *Nice Work* (1989)—have succeeded in part by appealing, in a decidedly non-threatening manner, to the curiosity of middle-brow, nonacademic readers about





developments and controversies within universities—developments and controversies international in scope and implication and widely discussed in newspapers and popular newsmagazines (ix).

What I wish to emphasize, however, is that Lodge's novels merit a more circumspect, thorough analysis than has been forthcoming to date. Lodge is a sophisticated literary theorist in his own right and I believe that his academic satires contain revolutionary prognostication about the future of literary studies and the potential for fruitful dialogue between fields including literary studies, philosophy, cognitive science and psychology.

It ought to be conceded that Lodge is not alone in anticipating these developments<sup>30</sup> but he has used fiction as a sort of laboratory in which thought experiments based on the way in which these dialogical interactions will play out and the results are especially compelling because they show, in a self-reflexive way that is not only clever but heuristically potent, that the theoretical discourse contained in the novels can be tangibly acted out in the self-same text. What I mean to say is that in

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<sup>30</sup> In his widely reviled recent academic novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), which I treated of earlier in this study, Tom Wolfe has essentially transformed the substance of his article, "Sorry But Your Soul Just Died," into a fictional world whose hub is the campus of the invented, or at least thinly disguised, Dupont University. In said article, Wolfe has argued that, "Neuroscience, the science of the brain and the central nervous system, is on the threshold of a unified theory that will have an impact as powerful as that of Darwinism a hundred years ago" (Wolfe). Wolfe uses *I Am Charlotte Simmons* as a sort of platform upon which to think through the implications of this revolutionary change, together with the perennial theme of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, though he never explicitly addresses the dialogical interaction between cognitive science and literary studies, which Lodge does. Indeed, as I will explain later in this chapter, Lodge makes the fecund interaction between literature and cognitive science the fulcrum of the narrative in *Thinks...*, just as the difference between tradition and innovation in literary studies plays that role in *Changing Places* and *Small World* and the tension between the extra-academic world and the denizens thereof does so in *Nice Work*.



*Thinks...* and elsewhere, Lodge conjures up characters who discuss ways in which literature could be written and interpreted and then, within the confines of the very novel in which these discussions take place, he offers a clear demonstration of the viability of the theory by building a fictional world according to the blue-prints generated by the characters who inhabit it.

Before I can buttress this claim through the careful analysis of textual evidence, it will obviously be necessary to essay a summary treatment of the novels that preceded *Thinks...* and to show that there is conspicuous contiguity uniting them with this more recent project. Lodge's novels have consistently performed both mimetically and prophetically: he has mirrored various phenomena in the academy and also anticipated the trajectory of literary, pedagogical and theoretical development. Like many literary satirists before him, Lodge has acted as a sort of diagnostician of the ills that afflict the world that he replicates in ink and implicitly argued for change by singling out specific sorts of vice and folly for witty attack.

Moreover, Lodge's works belong under the *aegis* of Menippean satire, particularly as an individual to whom he acknowledges a significant intellectual debt has illuminated it: Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>31</sup> In his study of Menippean satire entitled

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<sup>31</sup> Martin comments, "And while Lodge admittedly was reading 'a lot of Bakhtin' (particularly Bakhtin's book on Rabelais) while writing *Small World* (Haffenden, 166) the slant the novel takes on Ariosto, Spenser, Milton and Keats suggests his agreement with Parker. Whether one wants to describe *Small World* as "carnival" or "romance" seems immaterial, so nearly identical does it make the two concepts appear" (55). The influence of Bakhtin's thought on Lodge is enormous and, as the application of the various qualities of Menippean satire sifted from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by Weinbrot will help to elucidate, all of Lodge's academic satires speak the language of the ancient cynic with a distinctly Russian accent.



*Menippean Satire Reconsidered* (2005), Howard Weinbrot supplies an extremely useful catalogue of the various qualities of Menippean satire that Bakhtin enumerated in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

Briefly, these are: (1) an increased comic element; (2) liberation from history and legend so that it is unfettered by 'demands from an external verisimilitude to life' and includes an '*extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention*' (p. 114); (3) bold unrestraint in its 'use of the fantastic' and its 'testing of a philosophical idea' (p. 114); (4) joining of the fantastic and symbolic with crude '*slum naturalism*' (p. 115); (5) contemplation of the 'world on the broadest possible scale' and consideration of 'ultimate questions'(p. 115); (6) plot structure that takes us 'from earth to Olympus and to the nether world' and thus engenders dialogues of the dead; (7) "*Experimental fantasticality*" that takes one on high and changes "the scale of the observed phenomena of life"(p. 116); (8) 'moral-psychological experimentation: a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man' like madness; (9) scandal scenes and violation of 'the established norms of behavior and etiquette' that free us from predetermined motives and norms; (10) sharp contrasts, for 'the maniple loves to play with abrupt transitions and shifts, ups and downs, rises and falls, unexpected comings together of distant and disunited things, *mésalliances* of all sorts"(p. 118); (12); extensive use of other inserted genres, like letters, prose or poetry;



(13) consequent ‘multi-styled and multi-toned works’ (p. 118); (14) ‘concern with current and topical issues’ that make it ‘the journalistic genre of antiquity’ (p. 118). ‘Such,’ Bakhtin says, “are the basic generic characteristics of the menippea’ (Weinbrot 12).

As I will show, Lodge’s fiction has, albeit in subtly disguised or willfully modernized, terrestrial forms, all of the requisite ingredients to qualify as one of Bakhtin’s menippea. Examples abound, and I will begin with but two before giving more careful attention to the individual texts below: the “magical” restoration of the fecundity of Arthur Kingfisher’s otherwise limp mind and genitals by Persse McGarrigle, the valiant, naïve, knightly protagonist in *Small World*, when he utters the seemingly innocent but devastating query to the assembled mavens of literary theory who are vying for the UNESCO Chair (one of many “Holy Grails” that are scattered through the academic Arthurian romance in question): “What do you *do* if everybody agrees with you?”(319). Or the sudden appearance of Morris Zapp as the Helios to Robyn Penrose’s Medea in *Nice Work*, offering her a fat book contract and an academic post at his home institution of Euphoric State, thus trading his ubiquitous deerstalker for the laurels of the *deus ex machina*: “Yeah, we’re making a tenure-track appointment in Women’s Studies here, starting in the fall. You interested?”(357). Both of these incidents match criteria (1) and (7) as explicated above without actually taking us to a literal Olympus—an admittedly oxymoronic phrase provided that one is





not a worshipper of Zeus, but I trust that the point carries—or testing our credulity to the extent that the appearance of a deity or a monster might.

Lodge takes the task of the satirist seriously: his works seek to do what Gilbert Highet's formula for the creation of *bona fide* satire requires: "The purpose of satire is, through laughter and invective, to cure folly and to punish evil: but if it does not achieve this purpose, it is content to jeer at folly and to expose evil to bitter contempt" (Highet 156). Recall the *caveat* from the introduction in this regard: the greatest of satirical targets is always dissembling, seeking to be the Heracles without the hot bath or Ravelstein without the dalliances with young men. Thus he uses all of the techniques and strategies that identify the menippea as such to seek to rid the academy, and literary studies in particular, of a host of vices, or, as a last resort, to unleash a chorus of derisive laughter at those who will not be reformed. When, in the selfsame scene in *Small World* mentioned above, Morris Zapp was called upon to deliver a disquisition on his own theoretical stance and, for the umpteenth time, "...said more or less what he had said at the Rummidge conference"(318), he embodied the scholar who recycles the same tired platitudes in every venue and therefore reveals himself as one of Richard Sheppard's "frauds and depraved rogues who either 'win by bribery and deceit the awards that should have gone to the [genuinely] learned" or who, "far from being stupid, had so mastered the tricks of fraud that they could outwit the world"(Bevan 12). He is ridiculous, but attentive readers of Lodge's text can simultaneously scoff at his intellectual laziness and see it



as symptomatic of a syndrome not unique to Zapp alone. Lodge is not as vicious or misanthropic as some but, as the treatment of his novels that follows will make plain, he is a Menippean satirist of the first rank whose specific bailiwick is academe.

*Changing Places* confirms the claim that I just made above. In her recent study of the academic novel entitled *Faculty Towers* (2005), Elaine Showalter points out the difference between Lodge's academic satire and that of his literary comrade-in-arms, Malcolm Bradbury, as follows:

But while Bradbury saw permissiveness, collectivity, swinging, protest, and the counterculture as sinister, and the Howard Kirks who exploited it as monsters, Lodge identified with the other side, let its comic potential flourish openly, rather than surreptitiously (for Howard Kirk is so deliciously awful, seductive, and power-mad as to be quite attractive). Although *Changing Places* is critical of the excesses, pretensions, and posturings of the '60s university, overall it affirms the carnivalesque and liberatory aspects of the decade without sourness or cynicism. As Lodge said in interview, 'I don't think that in good faith I could satirize *in a destructive way* [emphasis mine] an institution which I belong to, I think I can stand back from the academic profession enough to see its absurd and ridiculous aspects, but I don't think it's really wicked or mischievous'" (Showalter 62).

Standing back, just as Socrates does during the debate between the Right and Wrong Arguments in *Clouds*, is a move that Lodge is extraordinarily adept at making. It is



certainly true that Lodge's novel does not contain characters that are really villainous or dreadful—at worst, they are self-deceived, befuddled, lazy or lusty. The two primary characters who change places in a fashion anticipated by the title are Phillip Swallow, a rather conservative, uptight British professor and a possible manifestation in ink of two phases of David Lodge's own experience made one<sup>32</sup>, and Morris Zapp, who may be a fictional *doppelgänger* of the American Milton scholar and postmodernist literary theorist Stanley Fish.<sup>33</sup> The two participate in an academic exchange program that has a dramatic effect on them both and lays the structural and thematic groundwork for all of Lodge's academic satire, insofar as it brings distant worlds into close proximity, not only for comic and satirical effect but also in order to fruitfully investigate the similarities and differences between them. Thus all of the works by Lodge that are suitable for discussion within the confines of the present study strictly conform to the tenth of the Bakhtinian criteria mentioned above.

Indeed, Lodge seems to be consistently interested in demonstrating how difficult and crucial dialogue between worlds is—in the case of *Changing Places*,

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<sup>32</sup> Martin explains that, "Phillip Swallow is not David Lodge, at least not the David Lodge of 1969 [when the novel takes place]. However, Lodge's account of his 1964-65 visit to America suggests that the portrayal of Phillip in *Changing Places* combines that experience with his time at Berkeley in 1969, at least to the extent of grafting certain aspects of his emotional development during his American stay onto the political and social realities of Berkeley that he observed four years later" (29). Without assuming anything about the strength of the link between the author and the character it is nevertheless possible to concede that Lodge understood what a sudden transition to "Euphoric State" or its myriad real analogues might do to the mind of a rather meek and inexperienced British academic in psychological terms.

<sup>33</sup> Amann confirms that, "As far as extratextual reality is concerned, Zapp is believed by certain people to owe something to Stanley E. Fish. In his TV documentary on a conference at Strathclyde University, David Lodge somewhat fosters that notion when he comments: 'Professor Stanley Fish is a dynamic American critic, sometimes thought to be the model for my own fictitious character Morris Zapp' (*Big Words...Small Worlds*)" (89).



between what Lodge describes as the rather staid and dreary world of literary academe at the fictional Rummidge University, as compared to the wildly provocative and rebellious world of Euphoric State in California, represented as they are in the novel by two artifacts that somewhat resemble the sorority of Statues of Liberty that grace the shores of France and America: “a replica of the leaning Tower of Pisa, built of white stone and twice the original size at Euphoric state, and of red brick and to scale at Rummidge”(8)—considering bold adventure versus dull routine or academic worlds in which the use of fashionable, opaque jargon in the service of careerism clashes with and often retards the quest for some *sensus communis* about the nature and meaning of literature. What Lodge presses is the point that these different worlds ought to be in mutually transformative contact rather than hostile or oblivious isolation. Lodge’s works suggest that human beings seek, however unwittingly, access to a *Lebenswelt* that contains all of the myriad microcosms individuals inhabit and, increasingly, think themselves unable to transcend or see beyond. With *Changing Places* and in the novels that follow he moves toward the same point that Christopher Norris makes in *Deconstruction and the ‘Unfinished’ Project of Modernity*, which I alluded to above but stands reiterating, in which the latter agrees with Donald Davidson and others that relativism and perspectivism are ultimately weakened by the brute fact that in order to be aware of and critically and philosophically engaged with various conceptual schemes, meta-narratives or value





systems, we must have some trans-paradigm criteria—we must move in a cognitive space above and between these schemes (Norris 43).

It is through such a space that Morris Zapp and Phillip Swallow pass, missing one another yet in jarringly close proximity, as they leave their familiar worlds behind in order to taste one another's as *Changing Places* opens: "High, high above the North Pole, on the first day of 1969, two professors of English Literature approached each other at a combined velocity of 1200 miles per hour"(3). These men are remarkably distinct in several ways: one, Swallow, is a "mimetic man," (10) malleable, prone to blend with those around him and rather arid in scholarly, intellectual and even sexual terms: "Such ideas never occurred to his conscious, English self. His unconscious may have been otherwise occupied; and perhaps, deep, deep down, there is, at the root of his present jubilation, the anticipation of sexual adventure. If this is the case, however, no rumor of it has reached Phillip's ego" (28). His single published monograph, *Hazlitt and the Amateur Reader*—which will cause a sensation when it is read as a bold rejection of post-structuralist and deconstructionist radicalism in *Small World* (164 *passim*)—has been ignored. Zapp, on the other hand, has achieved enormous success and is possessed by the ambition to corner the critical market with respect to the works of Jane Austen:

Some years ago he had embarked with great enthusiasm on an ambitious critical project: a series of commentaries on Jane Austen which would work through the whole canon, one novel at a time, saying absolutely everything



that could possibly be said about them. The idea was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle...so that when each commentary was written there would be simply *nothing further to say* about the novel in question (44).

Zapp is everything that Swallow is not: brash, gregarious and powerful. Thus he incarnates an American fearlessness and braggadocio, "After Zapp, the rest would be silence," (44) as compared to Phillip's timidity. The novel traces the metamorphosis of each character into someone distinctly different from his former self. Each man has an entanglement with the other's wife and in the process gains access to a part of himself that was formerly atrophied or opaque. Zapp becomes more compassionate and sympathetic, whereas Phillip enjoys a Dionysian romp: "Philip felt a physical sensation he hadn't felt for more than twenty years: a warm, melting sensation that began in some deep vital centre of his body and spread outwards, gently fading, till it reached his extremities"(98), is apprehended rather farcically during a live radio discussion that his disgruntled wife calls, and returns with a fresh appreciation for life in the microcosm of British academic life, which he formerly condemned with the Sartrean tag, "*La nausée*, Rummidge-style"(28). Thus, having encountered the prototypical liberated American female of the 1960s in the person of Zapp's estranged wife, Swallow is transformed, just as Zapp is altered by his very different experience with Hilary Swallow.



Kenneth Womack has isolated the theme of erotic love, or more precisely, the inability of academics to experience it in any authentic or fulfilling way in Lodge's academic satires, as the focus of his analysis in *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (2002). In the course of this study he lays heavy emphasis on ethical criticism and insists that academic novels may be decoded quite readily through recourse to the idea that understanding, unlike knowledge, always entails belief insofar as I always develop a theory of how I would behave in a given fictional scenario, as if I occupied the *Lebenswelt* of a given character (8-9). In a brief essay on Lodge's academic trilogy, Womack emphasizes Lodge's treatment of love and romance. He argues that Lodge depicts academics as typically unable to embark on intimate human relationships not mediated by abstract theorizing and professional discourse (78). I wish to argue that the situation created in *Changing Places* is somewhat richer and more complex than Womack's analysis might lead one to conclude. The fact that Swallow's amorous adventures lead to guilt and anxiety after fleeting moments of rapture does not buttress the assertion that his failure to find genuine love is the result of his status as an excessively cerebral academic without the capacity to leave the confines of his own mind. On the contrary, Swallow's dilemma can be more plausibly interpreted without jettisoning the valuable insights that flow from ethical reading as such. I do not think that we can read this episode as a straightforward, didactic admonition to beware the embarrassing consequences of adultery. Instead, I think Wayne C. Booth's mode of ethical reading ought to be



explored, not because it differs markedly from Womack's very plausible theory but because it takes the nuances of the situation in *Changing Places* more thoroughly into account. He argues:

When stories manage not only to engage us in serious thought about ethical matters, based on the reinforcement of certain ethical positions as admirable and others as questionable or indefensible, but also hook us into plots of conflict that are inseparable from that thinking, we meet what I consider to be the most valuable invitation to ethical criticism. The plot, in such stories, does not just present virtue and vice in conflict; the story itself *consists* of the conflict of defensible moral or ethical stances; the action takes place both within the minds of the characters in the story and inside the mind of the reader, as he or she grapples with conflicting choices that irresistibly demand the reader's judgment (27).

Changing places, both literally and metaphorically, allows both Zapp and Swallow to do just this. The exchange also invites the reader into the same process.

Like *Changing Places* before it, *Small World* constitutes a fascinating exercise in dialogical narration within the confines of a work of fiction that draws distinct discursive and existential spheres into fruitful colloquy. The scope of this second novel is far more ambitious, however. Lodge focuses more squarely upon literary studies in the academic milieu here, which might be construed as a way of collapsing the parameters of the project. Instead, the geographical, linguistic, cultural and





theoretical dimensions of *Small World* are enormous. From a conference in England to an illicit liaison in Italy to the ruminations of a Japanese theorist about language and communication<sup>34</sup>, this novel exists in a thoroughly ironic relationship with its title. It is also a thoroughgoing farrago: a mixture of diverse elements in terms of both form and content that shows that it lives up to stock definitions of satire as such.

In the words of Robert A. Morace:

*Small World* is a novel in which *Troilus and Creseyde* and absence and presence exist side by side. It is a campus novel for the age of the “global campus,” for a “civilization of light-weight luggage [and] permanent disjunctions” in which “everybody seems to be departing or returning from somewhere” (271). Consequently, a diagram of the novel’s plot would more closely resemble an airline map than Freytag’s pyramid. Instead of a linearly and hierarchically developed plot, we find a bewildering number of narrative lines of more or less equal significance that intersect at both the mimetic and diegetic levels. One character, for example, reads a novel written by a

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<sup>34</sup> Meditating on the correlations between golfing in a luxurious indoor Tokyo driving range and his work as a translator and University teacher of English—the exercises he grades are hilarious, e.g. “*Having rescued girl drowning, lifeguard raped in blanket her*” (141)—Akira Sakazaki closes the distance between golf and the theory of language as follows: “In this sport, Akira sees an allegory of the frustrations and elations of his work as a translator. Language is the net that holds thought trapped within a particular culture. But if one could only strike the ball with sufficient force, with perfect timing, it would perhaps break through the netting, continue on its course, never fall to earth, but go into orbit around the world”(141). Of course, this is precisely what is underway in the macrocosm of *Small World*—the diegetic level of the narrative does continuously orbit the world and dip into Tokyo, Rummidge, Germany’s Black Forest and countless other small worlds in order to draw a vast chorus of languages and the characters made out of them into the act.



character from one of the other narrative lines whom she will meet later when their narrative lines momentarily converge (192-193).

What is even more dazzling about Lodge's novel is his anticipation in his own theoretical discourse of developments of this kind—the blending of diegesis, mimesis, *skaz* and dialogue, commentary by one voice in the novel on the events that take place in a remote portion of its mimetic unfolding, and so forth—which is subsequently taken up as a model for his own work in fiction:

More obviously continuous with modernism are those novels in which the discourse of the characterized narrator is doubly oriented in Bakhtin's sense: for example, stylized *skaz* in *The Catcher in the Rye*, parodic *skaz* in Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, hidden polemic in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Some post-modernist novels combine a whole spectrum of stylized, parodic and dialogic narrative discourses—e.g. John Barth's *Letters*, or Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*. (Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, 41)

We can readily add *Small World* to this list, of course. Lodge interweaves such an astonishing carnivalesque chorus of voices and narrative modes into this text as to produce a sort of comprehensive *tour-de-force* of extant techniques.

One obvious example is the inclusion in *Small World* of Miss Maiden, a self-confessed pupil of Jessie Weston, whose *From Ritual to Romance* had such a profound influence on the poetic imagination of T.S. Eliot in constructing, for



example, his *The Wasteland* (Lodge, *Small World*, 11). In the course of *Small World*, Persse discusses the nature of romance with Miss Sybil<sup>35</sup> Maiden, who argues:

“It all comes down to sex, in the end,” Miss Maiden declared firmly. “The life force endlessly renewing itself.” She fixed the gravy boat in the Oxford medievalist’s hand with a beady eye. “The Grail cup, for instance, is a female symbol of great antiquity and universal occurrence.” (The Oxford medievalist seemed to have second thoughts about helping himself to the gravy.) “And the Grail spear, supposed to be the one that pierced the side of Christ, is obviously phallic. *The Waste Land* is really all about Eliot’s fears of impotence and sterility.”

“I’ve heard that theory before,” said Persse, “but I feel it’s too simple.”

“I quite agree,” said the Oxford medievalist. “This business of phallic symbolism is a lot of rot.” He stabbed the air with his knife to emphasize the point. (Lodge, *Small World*, 12)

So much is compressed into this small verbal exchange between three characters as to anticipate central elements of the entire novel and serve as a perfect microcosm of Lodge’s capacity to transform the world of the narrative into a laboratory in which

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<sup>35</sup> While it may be obvious to most, it ought to be explained that the character in question lives up to her name as a prophetess, anticipating the remainder of the novel with remarkable accuracy. Surely this is a laughably easy feat given that anticipating what is to come in a work of fiction is in no way equivalent to anticipating the extratextual future; on the other hand, Maiden’s capabilities seem to vindicate her stance with respect to the theory of romance as well as her abilities as a keen observer and interpreter of phenomena inside the small world of the novel.



thought experiments designed and played with by its denizens actually play out at the level of the plot in the literary world they inhabit.

To disentangle those threads: at the most mundane but nevertheless charmingly comic level, the Oxford medievalist neatly refutes his own refutation of the theory of phallic symbols by employing his knife in just such a fashion. The small ironies of academic life are never lost on Lodge's narrators, nor are they used for the sake of vicious assault but as means of inviting the reader to enjoy the silly inconsistencies between the ideas we propound and our ordinary everydayness. In addition, Persse turns out to *be* the protagonist of a Grail quest in the novel: Arthur Kingfisher, the pre-eminent literary theorist in the text, the painfully obvious—even at the level of nomenclature—analogue of the Fisher King, is impotent, sterile, distracted and disconsolate when the novel opens. As the MLA Conference approaches, faint stirrings of intellectual and sexual fecundity begin to manifest themselves, albeit in a tantalizingly fleeting fashion:

She [Kingfisher's companion, Song-mi Lee] obeys; but the kimono is delicate and valuable, its sash is wound around Song-mi Lee's tiny waist in a complex knot, and it is at least half a minute before she has disrobed, by which time Arthur Kingfisher's excitement has subsided—or perhaps it was always an illusion, a phantom, wishful thinking. He returns despondently to his book and his seat in front of the TV. But he has forgotten what new theoretical leap he had begun to see the possibilities of a few moments ago, and the naked





bodies writhing and clutching and quivering on the screen now seem merely to mock his impotence. (142)

Kingfisher *is* the Fisher King; Persse *is* the knight in pursuit of the grail, who will restore the vitality of the king and therefore of the land, as a comical episode of innocent misunderstanding later makes plain: “Looking for a girl,” said Persse indistinctly. “Looking for the Grail?” “A girl. Her name is Angelica. Have some crisps”(182), and the Grail is not only the opening up of that realm of trans-paradigm criteria that I have alluded to before and will address again; it is incarnate in the elusive twins, Angelica Pabst, who can hold forth about the intricacies of structuralism at the drop of a hat (14) and Lily, who materializes in the most base and lurid of contexts throughout Persse’s quest, as in a Soho pornographic display, where she is finally revealed as, possibly, the commingling of the two: “A red paper disc over her pubis bore the legend, “*Censored*”, and a red strip across her breasts identified her as “Lily”. A.L. Pabst. Angelica Lily Pabst.”(187) This notion that the theorist and the trollop are one and the same hangs tantalizingly in the air, though Persse will continue to insist that a familiar romantic trope is alive in this scenario: “Lily and Angelica! They must be sisters—twins. A modest one and a bold one” (259), and his experience will confirm that fact. Though they are, for all intents and purposes, two halves of a whole: the grey foliage of the Faustian tree of theory and the golden leaves of life on a single tree, the life-force roiling through mind and matter, the Aristophanic hermaphrodite made whole: the Grail, which is symbolized by their



complementary birthmarks, each in the form of an inverted comma, so that “When we stand hip to hip in our bikinis, it looks like we’re in quotation marks,”(325)—the Grail, that is also figured in the UNESCO chair, a post coveted by all those who are arrayed in the climactic dialogue at the MLA Convention which Persse both transforms into a parody of itself with his innocent question about the implications of consensus (319) and alchemically turns into the source of renewed intellectual and sexual fertility for the bedraggled Arthur Kingfisher:

“That is a very good question, a very in-ter-es-ting question. I do not remember that question being asked before.” He nodded to himself. “You imply, of course, that what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and then there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game. Am I right?”

“It sounds plausible,” said Persse from the floor. “I don’t have an answer myself, just the question.”(319)

What follows is the restoration of Kingfisher, confirming Persse’s role, as Miss Maiden explained at the outset of the piece (though she apparently had no inkling of the double meaning of her remarks): “Well, the gouty king is obviously the Fisher King ruling over a sterile land, and the miller’s son is the hero who restores its fertility through the magic agency of Puss in Boots, and is rewarded with the hand of the King’s daughter” (36). Of course, Sibyl Maiden is the mother of Angelica and Lily



Pabst, Kingfisher their father (334-335) and Persse is rewarded with the amorous attentions of Lily for revivifying Kingfisher (325) who seizes the UNESCO chair for himself (333).

*Small World* contains, therefore, both a whimsical, mad parody of the genre of romance and an homage to it—a following that includes betrayal, to echo Derrida's remarks cited above—complete with all of the apparatus of the Grail myth; an attack upon the vice and folly of academe and a celebration of the pleasure and profound wisdom that flows from the careful contemplation of literary artifacts (which it, *Small World*, obviously affords the attentive reader itself); a carnival of rival interpretations and theories that are ultimately shown to be in pursuit of difference rather than truth—the truth about this having been identified through the co-operation of the innocent knight and the wise but, until it is revealed, befuddled and limp king—and a narrative macrocosm large enough to enfold all of this and much else besides. Lodge celebrates the best of academic life while he makes its foibles risible, even as he vindicates the spirit of the Thinkery and the contemplation of difference in pursuit of truth that is its noblest aim, making pettier concerns risible in the process.

Just as *Small World* turns out to address a vast panoply of worlds that makes a coy joke of its title, so too does *Nice Work* at once succeed as a pun (which could even be construed as authorial self-congratulation, or more ironically, as implied self-abasement) and also as a product of clever verbal play with the plot and characters of the eponymous work. Admittedly, the vastness of *Small World* beggars this



succeeding volume: herein, Lodge initiates yet another enlightening and amusing dialogue—this time between business and industry on one hand and the study, teaching and theory of literature on the other. One might complain that Lodge's fiction becomes increasingly formulaic and mechanical as a result.

On the contrary, this novel and those that preceded and follow it demonstrate convincingly that, at worst, Lodge has hit upon a formal model that lends itself to the disclosure of, and initiation of dialogical interaction between, myriad worlds. The two participants in the central dialogue in *Nice Work* are Robyn Penrose of the Rummidge University English Department and Victor Wilcox, captain of British industry. The two are initially obliged to cross the permeable membrane between their respective native spheres by a sort of exchange program, arranged by the Vice-Chancellor of Rummidge in co-operation with the British government, to coincide with 1986, the year in which the novel is set:

A working party was set up last July to advise on the University's contribution to IY [Industry Year] and one of its recommendations, approved by Senate at its meeting of November 18th, is that each Faculty should nominate a member of staff to 'shadow' some person employed at senior management level in local manufacturing industry, nominated through CRUM, in the course of the winter term (85).

Initially nonplussed by the Vice-Chancellor's penchant for anagrams (85) the now familiar figure of Philip Swallow sees fit to recruit Robyn Penrose for the so-called





“SS” (88) and Victor (henceforth “Vic,” the sobriquet that Stuart Baxter, the fellow who recruits him, employs) is the requisite managing director from the industry side.

What follows is eminently predictable at one level: a collision of class, gender and philosophy between a young female deconstructionist and an ambitious, pragmatic, alpha-male capitalist. To summarize the novel this way would beggar its significance, however. As Ammann asserts:

Lodge takes the matter [Bakhtinian literary praxis] a step further when literary-critical views are not just cited with purely referential function but discussed and evaluated within the fictional context. In *Nice Work*, for example, Lodge not only refers to and explains Robyn Penrose’s deconstructionist approach to literature, but questions its viability by contrasting it with Victor’s pragmatic attitudes. By constant interplay between the protagonists’ views he subjects both their “philosophies” to either implicit or explicit (meta-) criticism (84).

Not only is this the case, but it has intriguing implications that the formula already delineated would leave the reader ill-equipped to anticipate. For example, after a tour of Vic’s factory, Robyn is forced to re-evaluate her political and economic principles:

Robyn was silent. She felt confused, battered, exhausted by the sense-impressions of the last hour. For once in her life, she was lost for words, and uncertain of her argumentative ground. She had always taken for granted that unemployment was an evil, a Thatcherite weapon against the working class;



but if this was employment then perhaps people were better off without it.

‘But the noise!’ she said again. ‘The dirt!’ (121)

Again, it would be easy to suggest that this is a predictable scenario: the ivory-tower intellectual<sup>36</sup> is shocked by the filthy cacophony of the factory floor, her theoretical solidarity with the workers of the world forgotten. Vic’s reaction to the discursive habits and intellectual maneuvers of his shadow is also somewhat predictable. He compares Robyn with his wife, Marjorie, much to the detriment of the latter:

Even that arrogant, interfering women’s libber from the University was more of a turn-on than poor old Marjorie. If her ideas were barmy, at least they were ideas, whereas Marjorie’s idea of an idea was something she had about wallpaper or loose covers [...] That he’d been able to make love to his wife only by whipping up crude fantasies about a woman he had every reason to detest was bad enough; but the bitterest thought was that, had she known what he’d done, Robyn Penrose would have nodded smugly at so complete a confirmation of her feminist prejudices. (165-167)

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<sup>36</sup> Robyn’s distress is certainly risible in light of the fact that she is steeped in the industrial novel: “The writers of industrial novels were never able to resolve in fictional terms the ideological contradictions inherent in their own situation in society. At the very moment when they were writing about these problems, Marx and Engels were writing the seminal texts in which the political solutions were expounded. But the novelists had never heard of Marx and Engels—and if they had heard of them and their ideas, they would probably have recoiled in horror, perceiving the threat to their own privileged position. (Lodge, *Nice Work*, 82). Confronting the reality of the factory forces Robyn to deal with two glaring oppositions: the difference between her vicarious imagining of the lot of the worker as opposed to the brute empirical facts, and the difference between her instinctive philosophical gravitation toward Marxist principals and the fact that, once she witnesses hard labor at first hand, the idea of having as much of it as one might need to survive strikes her as something of a white elephant.



It is fitting to proceed delicately here: we could certainly laud the novel in terms of its plausible verisimilitude; we could also condemn Vic for his chauvinist disposition and contemptibly outmoded ideas regarding gender; but I think it is important to identify the emergence, albeit slow and partial, of a kind of self-scrutiny that would not otherwise have haunted this experience, narrated as it is via free indirect discourse. Vic castigates himself, and though he does so in the main by scoffing at what Robyn Penrose would be likely to make of his experience, it is clear that the tribunal of his inner world now includes a voice that was formerly absent, that probes his understanding of gender and sexuality and insists that he think twice about the concepts that are at work behind his judgments and his conduct. He does not jettison his habitual attitudes, nor does he suddenly embrace deconstruction or feminism (absurdly improbable as both of those outcomes would be) but like David Lurie in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, he shows signs of limbering up his ethical imagination, of considering himself from an alien vantage-point.

As the relationship between the two participants in the SS deepens and intensifies, it leads to a sexual relationship upon which many have commented. Womack has characterized the results in the following way:

Björk argues, for example, that the rapprochement between industry and the university seems merely “superficial” because the “ideological coming to consciousness here necessitates a rejection of feminism and radical theory, together with an acceptance and assimilation of the politics of compromise”



(109, 112-13). Ian Carter also problematizes Lodge's *deus ex machina* conclusion in *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years*: "Lodge re-states the Victorian debate about culture and utility," Carter observes, "but ends with each still in its own box"(256).

Finally, Eagleton contends that "theory and practice can no more combine politically than they can sexually: at the sexual climax of the work, there is no real alternative between Vic's Romantic hermeneuticism—his pathetic over-investment of the event with meaning—and Robyn's blank postmodernist insistence on its brute, meaningless factuality"(102) [...] But as the novels in Lodge's academic trilogy consistently reveal, romantic love simply lacks the interpretive durability for mitigating the ideological dilemmas that its semiotic construction necessarily entails (96)

I have nothing against any of this, though I would like to suggest that it implies the use of an evaluative scheme to assess not only the success or fecundity of the erotic entanglement of the two primary personages in the fictional world (marginal, by all accounts) but the novel as a whole, if its ostensible aim is the mutual modification of these fictional minds through prolonged dialogue. If we scan two of the critical verdicts above, we will detect only apparent consensus: Björk laments the emergence of the "politics of compromise," whereas Carter argues that Vic and Robyn remain hived off within the same impermeable private spheres that they inhabited when the novel began, "each still in its [his and her, respectively] own box." Which is it? Do





these characters plunge into saccharine, tepid compromise or rigidly orthodox fealty to their original ideological positions?

I believe there is a third way. When Robyn Penrose contemplates the sunny perfection of the Rummidge campus later in the novel, her mind turns to the contemplation of a much different scenario:

And then she thought, with a sympathetic inward shudder, of how the same sun must be shining upon the corrugated roofs of the factory buildings in West Wallsbury, how the temperature must be rising rapidly inside the foundry; and she imagined the workers stumbling out into the into the sunshine at midday, sweat stained and blinking in the bright light, and eating their snap, squatting on oil-stained tarmac in the shade of a brick wall, and then, at the sound of a hooter, going back in again to the heat and noise and stench for another four hours' toil. But no! Instead of letting them go back into that hell-hole, she transported them, in her imagination, to the campus: the entire workforce—laborers, craftsmen, supervisors, managers, directors, secretaries and cleaners and cooks [...] (347)

Similarly, Vic has undergone something of a transformation, not only because of the loss of his post and his abortive attempt to persuade Robyn, an avowed adversary of traditional concepts of love and romance, into a relationship: “‘I mean it,’ he said. ‘You’re a natural teacher. That stuff about metaphor and metonymy, for instance. I see them all over the shop now. TV commercials, colour supplements, the way



people talk” (355) What these passages reveal is that the climax of the novel ought not be collocated too readily with the sexual climaxes, however mechanical or foolishly romanticized, experienced by the central characters. Instead, though it could readily be construed as somewhat maudlin or superficial, both of these individuals have been changed utterly in terms of their understanding of things as they stand as opposed to things as they ought to be. Vic’s understanding of language, of rhetorical devices and poetic tropes, has made him less of a passive, unthinking observer of language; Robyn has the sudden impulse to open the academy to those she saw toiling in the infernal stink and gloom of the foundry. Inevitably, having experimented (to anticipate the discussion of Hardy by Adamson below) with a different structure of sensations, both will interpret variegated phenomena with fresh eyes. It is in that sense that I believe the novel succeeds in displaying, plausibly, without wholesale obliteration of the differences between the respective worlds of these fictional minds, how each has informed and transformed the other.

The sexual relationship sputtered, but Robyn Penrose will undoubtedly modify her pedagogical praxis when next she embarks on a lecture on the industrial novel. Vic will inevitably greet with greater sophistication and skepticism whatever system of signs he next encounters. Neither has remained in his or her own box, nor have they melted into some sort of syrupy, anodyne agreement. Instead, they remain who they are *with a difference*. Far from marking the impossibility of genuine



communication, this seems to me to be the hallmark of it, and the real target of satirical derision is its absence at the outset.

True to this same form, Lodge draws another pair of microcosms into dialogue in *Thinks...* In fact, the on-line version of the British newspaper “The Guardian Unlimited” dated March 9, 2001 features an amusing summary of said novel under the rubric of the “Digested Read.” The Digested Read is designed to supply the beleaguered bibliophile with a smattering of salient quotations from a work that has enjoyed attention and acclaim, followed by a laughably concise encapsulation of the whole piece, preceded by the caveat, “And if you really are pressed:” in the case of Lodge’s novel, the summary reads as follows: “And if you really are pressed: cogito, ergo shag.” It is certainly possible to reduce the novel to this glib parody of Descartes.

However, it is my intention to argue in what follows that *Thinks...* can be read as a sort of thought experiment—an attempt to imagine what a dialogue (Bloom would undoubtedly wince at this) between C.P. Snow’s *Two Cultures*, as he dubbed them in his 1959 lecture, might yield. Snow’s point was essentially that “literary intellectuals” and “scientists” were no longer able to communicate in a mutually intelligible discourse, let alone respect the role that each faction played in the cultural life of Great Britain, Snow’s bailiwick and the scene of his success, ironically, given the contempt he shows for many in the literary camp, as an academic novelist and



critic as well as a scientific researcher and civil servant. In the course of his lecture Snow described the state of things between the two factions as follows:

The non-scientists have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man's condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both life and thought to the existential moment. And so on. Anyone with a mild talent for invective could produce plenty of this kind of subterranean back-chat (5).

Snow doggedly defended the optimism and pragmatism of the scientific camp against the gloomy navel-gazing of the literary intellectuals, finally asserting that he did so because his aim had always been simple, ethical and more readily attained by scientists than literary men, to wit: "Peace. Food. No more people than the earth can take" (lxxi). It ought to be noted in his defense that in a sort of apologia published in 1963, Snow conceded that

With good fortune, however, we can educate a large proportion of our better minds so that they are not ignorant of imaginative experience, both in the arts and in science, nor ignorant either of the endowments of applied science, of the remarkable suffering of most of their fellow humans, and the responsibilities which, once they are seen, cannot be denied (100).





Despite the myriad flaky—how could I possibly resist?—rhetorical flourishes that drift into his argument, including the suggestion that when he was accosted by an unnamed scientist who alleged that modern literature, particularly by such dubious personages as Pound and Yeats, had hastened the arrival of Auschwitz, he refused to “defend the indefensible” and let the charge stand, Snow did manage to index a real fissure in the cultural milieu he inhabited which remains open even now.

The Sokal Affair, which broke in 1996, attests to the persistence of the mutual antagonism and derision that Snow sensed at High Table at Cambridge some thirty years previous. While vague generalizations are no substitute for more precise and balanced analysis, it is still the case that literary intellectuals and scientists, particularly those in the so-called hard disciplines like the physicists Sokal and Bricmont, find themselves at odds over the role each is afforded in academic life and the role the academy ought to play in a broader context.

Far from confirming the impossibility of intimate communication between members of these factions, Lodge’s academic satires actually target what might be identified as the *lalophobia*—that is the aversion to speaking—which is always exhibited by the respective emissaries from the two cultures in the first instance.

The fact that the author of *Thinks...* gets Snow’s drift, and incorporates his thinking into this latest effort at dialogical resolution of a seemingly intractable separation of worlds, is confirmed early in the novel when one of the professors at Gloucester University, a “green fields” University near Cheltenham where the novel



is set, muses “We’re an architectural allegory of The Two Cultures, I’m afraid”(11), explaining as he does so that the too-large campus, the product of sixties idealism, contains a sort of no-man’s-land dividing the Arts buildings at one end and those of the Sciences at the other.

The representatives of the factions described by Snow in the fictional world Lodge conjures are: Ralph Messenger, a champion of the burgeoning field of cognitive science, unapologetic reductive materialist and member of the group of “priapic professors,” prone to hedonistic indulgence, that do routinely materialize in Lodge’s fiction—at one point Ralph muses: “BSE and AIDS between them have made two of the greatest pleasures in life, prime beef and wild pussy, possible causes of a horrible death...sad”(3), and Helen Reed, a recently widowed novelist and teacher of creative writing, who says of Ralph’s research into cognitive science, brain activity and Artificial Intelligence, “Your mind/body shop sounds like a modern version of Frankenstein’s laboratory” (38). She is also committed when the novel opens to a rather chaste and temperate existence, thinking to herself as she strolls the campus and watches the antics of the students, “There are pleasures generated by self-denial that many young people will never know” (30). It is important to note that while many of the discussions between the two unfold precisely as one might anticipate given the model offered up by Snow, in this case the literary intellectual is more of an upright, altruistically oriented sort, whereas the scientist is brilliant but primarily driven by a kind of cheerful nihilism, his only gods his palette and his penis.



What is also distinct about Lodge's fiction is that he manages to offer evidence of the power of literary fiction to do several important things that he catalogues himself in *Consciousness and the Novel*. The capacity of literary fiction to capture qualia, or the idiosyncratic subjective impressions that combine to form a given experience, is one good example. A brief, somewhat pedantic excursus on the subject, embarked upon by Ralph for Helen's benefit, ought to explain the concept: "The specific quality of our subjective experiences of the world—like the smell of coffee, or the taste of pineapple. They're unmistakable, but very difficult to describe. Nobody's figured out how to account for them yet" (36). As the eminent narratologist Dorrit Cohn has been arguing since the late seventies at least, literary fiction is different from other human creations because it gives us, particularly via the free indirect style, the illusion of telepathic access to the thoughts of another and simultaneously dramatizes the struggle toward mutual understanding that plays out in the lives of characters within narratives who do not enjoy the reader's capacity to see into what she aptly dubs the *Transparent Minds* of others. Catching human experience in this way is something that novels are uniquely good for and Lodge invokes Noam Chomsky and Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness and the Novel* to try to fortify his case, as both are prominent thinkers interested in the inner workings of mind and language who select literary fiction as a special source of insight about both. Chomsky has argued that "It is quite possible that we will always learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology" (10).



Dennett, who cited a previous novel, Lodge's *Nice Work*, in his own *Consciousness Explained*, remarked to the Chronicle of Higher Education: "I enjoyed it a lot," Mr. Dennett says of the novel -- adding, frankly, "I had expected to find it horrible. What's fascinating is that [Mr. Lodge] articulates the discomfort, the anxiety, that I have been feeling for years. There's a queasiness that people feel as they see the march of science into the brain and the mind, a fear that we'll be swallowed up and turned into robots" (McLemee).

Helen adroitly illustrates both the concept of transparent minds, an illusion created by discursive prestidigitation, and the mendaciousness of conscious beings like ourselves when she recites a passage from Henry James for the sake of revealing that what, according to Ralph, cognitive science has been seeking all along, novelists achieve constantly, "How to give an objective, third-person account of a subjective, first-person experience" (42), so that he can witness the third-person report of first-person subjectivity, e.g. "moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once—she had tried it—the sense of the slippery and the sticky"(43) and then latterly thinks, ashamed, that she pretended that the recital was totally spontaneous whereas in fact she had carefully rehearsed it in order to impress her class a short while before meeting Ralph.

The opacity of consciousness is as salient, then, as its simulated transparency within the confines of Lodge's novel. Helen will discover that her husband was carrying on an affair behind her back while sustaining a saintly demeanor in her





presence; Ralph is perpetually making clandestine advances, both at Helen and other women, with the tacit permission of his wife, who will pretend he is loyal as long as he does not humiliate her on “home ground”—as soon as a mind coalesces, Helen is inclined to conclude, lies are born: “How adept at deception we human beings are, how easily it comes to us. Did we acquire that ability with self-consciousness?”(105). It is entirely possible, of course, to conclude that the two are inextricably linked, just as the son of one of the primary pair’s colleagues who is autistic is described as being incapable of dissembling: “Oliver doesn’t tell lies,’ says Marianne, mother of the boy, ‘he doesn’t understand the concept’”(134). Interestingly, a term originally coined by the psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen in his eponymous treatise—*Mindblindness*—elegantly illustrates what might well lie at the heart of the autistic individual’s inability to perform well on tests of the capacity to ascribe mental states to others or distinguish between and describe their own. Such a claim, albeit provisional, is nevertheless a fitting departure point from the mind of an autistic boy incapable of lying to the mind of a bat.

I alluded earlier to Lodge’s devotion to the polyphonic, carnivalesque theory of the novel argued for by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and elsewhere. One of the most distinct instances of Lodge’s having successfully moved into different stylistic modes and vocal registers is his extremely convincing and amusing production of a number of parodies of different literary eminences. Helen Reed enjoys a tour of Ralph’s lab shortly after they formally meet in the novel’s



second chapter. There, she is introduced to an enormous mural, produced with Ralph's consent by an eccentric professor with time on his hands, based upon various renowned thought-experiments in the history of cognitive science and the philosophy of mind. Frank Jackson's Mary, the woman raised in a monochrome world; Searle's Chinese Room and Nagel's Bat (51). The latter is an illustration of Nagel's notorious essay contrived to undercut reductive solutions to the mind-body problem, "What is it Like to Be a Bat?"

Helen hits upon an ingenious notion: she has her creative writing pupils write a version of the essay as a short-story by some luminary or other, such that, for example, Lodge offers the following parody of Martin Amis as a bat: "Well, we hang out a lot during the day. We hang out in caves, crevices, under eaves, inside roofs. Crapping when you're upside down is an art," or Beckett: "Where? When? Why? Squeak. I am in the dark" (95). The essay is significant for my purposes for another reason: in it, Nagel makes it apparent that while it is impossible to know what it is like to be a bat, it might well be possible, however provisionally, perhaps in the spirit of empathetic imaginative projection, to imagine what it is like to be another human being. He argues:

It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case. There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's



experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone who is sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view—to understand the ascription in the first person as well as the third, as it were (163).

Hence the relevance of Nagel's madly ingenious inquiry to the larger analysis of Lodge's novel now underway. To take up a point of view other than one's own, i.e. to render first-person subjectivity in the third person, is essentially the stock in trade of the author of narrative fiction and the reason that, absent the mindblindness attributed to poor Oliver, literary intellectuals and those who are trained in the production and interpretation of literary narrative are better suited for the exercise of the ethical imagination that Snow encouraged all to pursue at the outset.

Despite the fact that Ralph by no means undergoes a wholesale moral conversion by virtue of his "cross-cultural" dialogue with Helen, he does make the telling gesture of inviting her to give the closing address at a conference on cognitive science that he has organized. He has, over the course of their many discussions and even an ill-starred affair, come to admire her intellect and the links between what seemed to be their disparate life-worlds at the outset. Helen makes the following remarks:

The idea of the self is under attack today, not only in much scientific discussion of consciousness, but in the humanities too. We are told that it



is a fiction, a construction, an illusion, a myth. That each of us is “just a pack of neurons,’ or just a junction for converging discourses, or just a parallel processing computer running without an operator. As a human being and as a writer, I find that idea abhorrent—and intuitively unconvincing. I want to hold on to the traditional idea of the autonomous self. A lot depends on it, including copyright (318).

The frank conservatism voiced here is evidently a sign that while he has found an encounter with notions culled from cognitive science stimulating, Lodge remains a proponent of some rather staid metaphysical and cultural notions. In order to explain this conservative conclusion, Barbara Arizti points to the contrast between this and previous academic satires by Lodge: In *Changing Places*, Swallow and Zapp end up swapping both lives and wives; the resulting transformation in intimate relations (and personal identities) is presented as a good thing; on the other hand: “ ‘*Small World* ends with a kind of celebration of traditional marriage, a party where estranged couples are reconciled and new marriages announced.’ She argues that his later works are ‘affected by discourses that try to contain the counterculture and the sexual revolution.’ He longs for ‘a return to a fictional world free from the excesses of both theory and experiment.’ Lodge indicates that he looks forward to adding Ms. Arizti’s volume to his collection of critical studies of his fiction, but that he does not read such books himself” (McLemee). McLemee’s commentary concerning Lodge’s own views





of critical interpretations of his work are enlightening: he might consider them, but certainly is not prepared to have his writing dramatically altered by inferences concerning his personal motives and ideological commitments.

While he finds some of the implications of evolutionary and cognitive theory distressing, Lodge is nonetheless willing to concede that much insight into our narrating minds can be gained from openness to dialogue with these new and challenging ideas. Snow would, I think, approve of this flexibility of mind.

As compared to this rich vein of insight, *Deaf Sentence* contrasts with the remarkable efforts Lodge has produced previously. It cannot be judged to be his strongest novel. It does contain some of his characteristic blend of edification and entertainment, particularly those portions devoted to linguistics, aging and the psychological and existential implications of losing one's hearing. Many of the standard devices (an illicit affair between an attractive but mad female pupil and a professor; somewhat banal brushes with sadomasochism and mild middle-aged sexual experimentation; academic politics and the struggle to balance scholarly existence and ordinary life) that appear in his other novels are arrayed before the reader, none of them very *defily*--no pun intended here, though from the title onward, this novel is crowded with puns on deafness that begin to tax the reader after the first few appear--deployed.

Shifts of point-of-view are used effectively throughout this text. Lodge is a virtuoso in this regard and has written extensively about the centrality of free indirect



discourse in his *Consciousness and the Novel*, arguing that the style in question and the genre of the novel are inextricably linked (33). Changes from first to third person in *Deaf Sentence* parallel the protagonist's obligation, as his hearing worsens, to try to reconcile two streams of communication: aural (and therefore fragmented and frequently deceptive from his perspective) on one hand and, on the other, all else that stimulates the senses and makes up a more coherent world that the traitorous testimony of the failing ear can be examined against (82-83).

Dwindling into the truth of mortality is really the still thematic point about which the narrative turns and there is a poignant line in the eighteenth chapter, about the protagonist's dying father, that echoes Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "What a relief it was to see the bare forked animal clothed again"(267). Lodge is adept at juxtaposing the cerebral and the viscerally somatic, the latter being quite obviously emphasized in this line. In sum, this is a diverting tale without the satirical splendor or philosophical/literary heft of his previous efforts.

## Hynes

Elaine Showalter's 2005 study of the academic novel, a very brief but surprisingly comprehensive monograph waggishly entitled *Faculty Towers*, contains some remarks about the works of James Hynes. At one point, Showalter summarizes Hynes' novel, *The Lecturer's Tale*, this way: "On one level, *The Lecturer's Tale* is about the revenge



of literature on theory” (110). One question that seems to flow naturally from this assertion is: Why would literature *need* revenge on theory? I wish to argue that Hynes’ academic satire, not only in *The Lecturer’s Tale* but also in an earlier volume of short stories entitled *Publish & Perish*, does seek revenge against a particular kind of theory and those who teach and write under its spell. More specifically, I wish to contend that Hynes is angered by violations of the sanctity of literature, by the substitution of pyrotechnical postmodern play for the taxing but rewarding process of seeking to understand how the synthesis of form and content produces the meanings of a literary artifact. His fiction contains myriad examples of pompous frauds that use jargon and baffle-gab to become oracles in their own right rather than midwives for the ideas contained in texts. In fact, one formula pronounced by a character in *The Lecturer’s Tale* elegantly reveals his understanding of the ideal hierarchical relationship between works of literature and theoretical and critical discourse *about* those works: “A literary work is any work of imaginative writing—prose, poetry or drama—that is inherently more *interesting*—rich, complex, mysterious—than anything that could be said *about* it” (24). What this implies is that the history of literary theory, which has borne witness to a steady, inexorable transition from the acknowledgement of the author as the individual whose intentions and acts imbue a text with meaning to the contemporary enthusiasm for the reader, and particularly the critic or theorist, as the primary source of a text’s meaning, has had very unfortunate consequences. The work itself is clearly identified here as far more important than



anything that might be said about it and that amounts to heretical talk in contemporary academe, or at the very least, those parts of contemporary academe that venerate the theorist or critic rather than the texts he or she ostensibly works to elucidate.

Hynes' deft and beguiling commingling of elements of the traditional academic novel and the gothic fiction of individuals like Poe and M.R. James not only makes it possible better to understand the nature of academic life and the perils and pleasures that it entails. It also produces an indictment of the neglect of the avowed aims and aspirations of scholarly praxis: thinking, reading, writing and teaching. Hynes' satire attacks lying, baffle-gab, hubris and a specific kind of mystification and obfuscation that makes bewildered and obedient disciples out of those who are supposed to be anything but thanks to the special sort of experience that learning about literature involves. Instead of being equipped with the ability to think clearly and the energy and enthusiasm, the imagination and ethical discernment necessary for careful reading and persuasive argument in favor of the textual interpretations that it yields, individuals who are part of the academy in the world of Hynes' narratives are subject to darker forces and driven by other, more sinister motives. In the end, Hynes' hybrid brand of academic satire has the unusual virtue of allowing literature the means to defend itself against a variety of foes, both mundane and monstrous.

Hynes' works contain attacks upon vices that are by no means unique to those who populate the academy but that manifest themselves in specific forms therein. For





example, the protagonist in Hynes' short story, "Queen of the Jungle," is guilty of two vices, one that is symptomatic of all-too-human moral frailty, the other a sign of the prevalence of what, to echo Sokal and Bricmont, might be described as fashionable nonsense. He is, like the primary characters in the majority of Hynes' narratives, an academic in jeopardy, an individual with promise who is in the midst of a crisis. Paul is in the midst of a dead-end post doc in Iowa while his wife, Elizabeth, has earned early tenure review at the University of Chicago. In addition, Paul is clandestinely sleeping with a rather vacuous but nevertheless vivacious graduate student in communications. The story derives its title from the crucial role played in the narrative by Charlotte, the feline familiar of the unwittingly betrayed Elizabeth, a preternaturally cunning creature that will eventually ensure that Paul is punished for his duplicity, in part thanks to the intervention of a pet psychic, whom Paul regards with a mixture of dread and disdain after she seemingly discovers evidence of his affair while "communing" with the cat: "And now, for a man who, professionally, anyway, didn't even believe in the subconscious, let alone the occult, he was uncannily certain that Kym was the woman whose image the psychic had gleaned somehow from Charlotte" (13). Lying and cheating are familiar targets of moral censure and therefore it is the second of Paul's transgressions that deserves particular attention. His wife's rising prominence in the English Department at the University of Chicago has given her the requisite influence to lobby for a position for her spouse. The Chair of the Department agrees to consider him but only if a book based on his



dissertation, a book that he has been toiling over for months without success, shows promise. In an effort to resuscitate his career, he finally despairs of actually writing anything with real meaning or merit, and engages in an exercise in what might be described as automatic writing:

Then he laid his hand on the mouse, selected the gibberish, and deleted it. He began to type, convinced that this moment right here, right now, was the end of his career. So he just began spewing, churning out a farrago of wild speculations and categorical statements unsupported by any evidence or argument. It didn't matter what he said, the words meant nothing to him, what he enjoyed was the glow of the screen on his skin, giving his hands the pallor of a corpse. He liked the cool, dry feel of the keys under his fingertips. He liked the way the brittle rattle of the keys seemed to amplify the silence behind him. Indeed, he felt the pressure of the silence mount, as if he were filling up the room with words. His hands flew, the keyboard clattered, and he filled the screen with dirty limericks, multilingual puns, the lyrics of TV theme songs (44).

Together with the success of the pet psychic, this episode confirms that in this short story as well as Hynes' other works, what Dolezel describes as "alethic constraints on a fictional world," (115) have been relaxed. This is simply one technical means of parsing the distinction between naturalistic representation or literary realism and the



broader range of possibilities that opens up within a fictional world that, as in Hynes' case, generally contains strict verisimilitude but occasionally allows for the emergence of agents or episodes with supernatural properties. One key to producing a hermeneutical strategy with maximal explanatory breadth in this case is that Hynes' fiction is replete with instances of literalization, that is, the transformation of something figurative or abstract into something tangible within the confines of the fictional world. The fact that Victoria Victorinix, renowned author of *Daughters of the Night: Clitoral Hegemony in LeFanu's Carmilla* (Hynes, *The Lecturer's Tale*, 4) and Associate Chair of the protagonist's department in *The Lecturer's Tale* has a large amount of academic prestige and power because of her avant-garde position in queer and feminist theory is implied by the realistic description of her personality and position in the novel. Moreover, it is amplified by the eventual revelation that she is, in fact, a vampire. Thus she is represented in literal terms, within the novel, as the uncannily powerful and malevolent being that she might be understood to be without the addition of unusual abilities and characteristics, without making her, to borrow Dolezel's language again, an alethic alien. Hynes has basically taken the sort of sotto voce insult, "She's a real vampire," and cashed it in ontologically.

The proof that the exercise in automatic writing is just that, a *bona fide* suspension of alethic constraints, appears later in the narrative when it becomes clear that the bizarre mess produced by the protagonist has actually elicited high praise.



Due to a rather formulaic, farcical mix-up, Elizabeth has delivered Paul's explosion of logorrhea into the hands of her Chair unchanged. Panicked, he calls his wife, only to discover that:

"...I wanted to let you know that Walter was very impressed with your chapter."

Paul blinked and sat up slowly, swinging his feet to the floor.

"I have to admit I was a little surprised," Elizabeth was saying. "Frankly, it was a little too Andrew Ross for me, but Walter loved it, called it *very* cutting edge."

Paul cleared his throat and said, "He *liked* it?"

"Hell yes!" Elizabeth said heartily. "Especially the linkage you made between 'The Metamorphosis' and *My Mother the Car*" (49).

This situation is risibly preposterous—or so it would seem. What is delectable about it, however, is the fact that it implies that the emperor is naked, that the individual who is invested with the power to determine who joins the august scholarly ranks of those who will help culture to understand itself, as it were, is giddy with excitement over nonsense.

In his concise, clever monograph which I referred to in the course of my analysis of Dickinson's lyric, the better to buttress the argument for poetry as a means





of making other minds transparent, *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt has carefully deciphered the difference between a liar and someone who is deliberately bullshitting:

This is the crux of the distinction between him [the bullshit artist] and the liar. Both he and the liar represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth. The success of each depends upon deceiving us about that. But the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth values of his statements are of so central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it...what he cares about is what we think of *him* (55).

The relevance of this distinction to Paul's situation in "The Queen of the Jungle" should be apparent. Recall that Paul simply savored the uncanny, trance-like process of writing in this automatic fashion, that "the words meant nothing to him," only the strange delight of letting them flow mattered. To borrow from Frankfurt again, "Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case certainly not *wrought*." (22) What I want to press, however, is the fact that it links him to a number of professional generators of bafflegab, who true to Frankfurt's formula, seem to be



interested in the performance itself, the act of producing occult, inscrutable, mysterious tripe that will lead the naïve reader to infer, falsely, that the individual responsible for the utterances in question is a rare and remarkable being, a profound thinker.

Let me supply just two examples of the sort of individual I have in mind, in order to demonstrate that Hynes' targets are plentiful and lamentably real. The first is one of a swarm of possible candidates carefully collocated by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont in the wake of the former's having engineered a scandalous hoax, a masterful display of Trojan-horse rhetoric and, in a sense, a solid instance of the kind of Menippean satire, or damning the other with his own words, that I have explained elsewhere. For those who may not be aware of this effort, the Sokal hoax, named for its engineer, the physicist Alan Sokal, was perpetrated on the editorial staff and readership of the postmodern cultural studies journal *Social Text* (published by Duke University). In 1996, Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, submitted a paper of nonsense camouflaged in jargon for publication in *Social Text*, as an experiment to see if a journal in that field would, in Sokal's words: "publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions." The paper, titled "*Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*," was published in the Spring/Summer 1996 "Science Wars" issue of *Social Text*, which at that time had no



peer review process, and so did not submit it for outside review. On the day of its publication, Sokal announced in another publication, *Lingua Franca*, that the article was a hoax, calling his paper "a pastiche of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense," which was "structured around the silliest quotations I could find about mathematics and physics" made by postmodernist academics.<sup>37</sup>

In their book *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, Sokal and Bricmont carefully sift the works of thinkers such as Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari for wanton abuse of scientific terms and concepts. It is important to point out that this is the full scope of their project, i.e. they are professional physicists and therefore have a vested interest in the truth or falsity—in the traditional, correspondence theory sense of truth—of claims made within that domain. They do not pretend to have any expertise in continental philosophy, cultural or literary theory. Indeed, to pronounce on those subjects would reek of hypocrisy, in that they are seeking to reveal charlatans who speak of what they do not know when they ought to remain silent, or simply stick to the terms of art that they understand. They offer quite a brutal critique of Kristeva's use of mathematical concepts here, for example (the passage they attack and then the analysis are presented):

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<sup>37</sup> A distillation of the events surrounding Sokal's ingenious hoax can be found here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal\\_affair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair).



“[I]n the syntactic operations following the mirror stage, the subject is already sure of his uniqueness: his flight towards the ‘point  $\infty$ ’ in the signifying [*significance*] is stopped. One thinks for example of a set  $C_0$  on a usual space  $R_3$  where for every continuous function  $F$  on  $R_3$  and each integer  $n > 0$ , the set of points  $X$  where  $F(X)$  exceeds  $n$  is *bounded*, functions of  $C_0$  tending to 0 when the variable  $X$  recedes towards the ‘other scene’. In this topos, the subject placed in  $C_0$  does not reach this ‘center exterior to language’ about which Lacan speaks and where he loses himself as subject, a situation that would translate the relational group that topology calls a *ring*.’

This is one of the best examples of Kristeva’s attempts to impress the reader with fancy words that she obviously does not understand. Andreski “advised” the budding social scientist to *copy* the less complicated parts of a mathematics textbook; but the definition given here of the set of functions  $C_0(R_3)$  is not even correctly copied, and the errors stand out to anyone who is familiar with the subject”<sup>38</sup> (Sokal 47-48).

This example would appear to be entirely in keeping with the episode from Hynes’ tale and the account of the concept of bullshit offered by Frankfurt. Kristeva’s words

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<sup>38</sup> To be candid, I am not such a person—therefore the complete opacity of this passage is intact even after Sokal and Bricmont have had at it. That it is unintelligible to the ordinary layperson does not mean that it is unintelligible in itself: all that is being pressed here is that even experts find it to be garbled and incomprehensible, so what is the otherwise discerning reader of texts that do not presuppose an intimate knowledge of sophisticated mathematics and physics to do?





cannot be rightly said to amount to a *lie*, in that they do not constitute evidence of a deliberate fabrication or an attempt to lead the reader away from the truth. Instead, what this amounts to is an instance of bullshit, because the individual who wrote the sentence obviously had no interest in the relationship between the words that make it up and any actual—or even possible—state of affairs; at the very least, this is the reading endorsed by Sokal and Bricmont. According to them, it is a colorful, strange, potentially intimidating display of technical language that is devoid of any real meaning.

Recall that Paul had abandoned any real hope of accomplishing anything significant when he emitted the dejecta of dejection, as it were. Nevertheless, he makes no effort to retract the chapter when it produces such favorable results because the desired end has been achieved: someone has made a judgment with respect to his character and intellect, regardless of the actual merit of the material he has produced. The second example that I am inclined to present is similar. It is a sentence that won Judith Butler, who remains Maxine Elliot professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, the dubious distinction of first prize in the journal *Philosophy and Literature*'s 1999 Bad Writing contest:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power



relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power (Myers).

This is bullshit of a different order. It is impossible to criticize the language used in this passage on the same grounds that Sokal and Bricmont relied upon for their withering attack on Kristeva because Butler has not co-opted terms of art from a sphere of knowledge that she can make no claim to mastering. This is simply cryptic, ugly, jargon-laden mystery mongering. It is also a stylistic and grammatical dog's breakfast; determining the subject of this sentence, for example, is not impossible, but it is inordinately difficult. It ought to be noted that the quarrel here is over style, not substance, manner rather than matter. One could work out the meaning of this passage but it would require what Nussbaum deems inordinate, taxing effort.

The question is: why would someone write this way? One possible answer is offered by Martha Nussbaum:

Butler gains prestige in the literary world by being a philosopher; many admirers associate her manner of writing with philosophical profundity. But



one should ask whether it belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric. Ever since Socrates distinguished philosophy from what the sophists and the rhetoricians were doing, it has been a discourse of equals who trade arguments and counter-arguments without any obscurantist sleight-of-hand. In that way, he claimed, philosophy showed respect for the soul, while the others' manipulative methods showed only disrespect. One afternoon, fatigued by Butler on a long plane trip, I turned to a draft of a student's dissertation on Hume's views of personal identity. I quickly felt my spirits reviving. Doesn't she write clearly, I thought with pleasure, and a tiny bit of pride. And Hume, what a fine, what a gracious spirit: how kindly he respects the reader's intelligence, even at the cost of exposing his own uncertainty (Nussbaum).

There are several elements of this analysis that demand close scrutiny. It is certainly not the case that all philosophical ideas can be articulated in a limpid, simple way. All disciplines have their jargon, their technical terms and abstruse, specialized concepts. Thus it would seem to be unduly idealistic—and even to smack of a certain philistinism—to assert that anything that is not lucid and succinct is an attempt at obscurantism. However, Nussbaum's analysis simply implies that an intelligent reader or potential interlocutor ought, through the requisite application of his or her reason, to be able to fathom what a particular proposition means, to assess the truth of



individual premises or the validity of complete arguments. What is implied in this case is that even lengthy, careful thinking about the substance of this passage will yield, in many instances, only a vague apprehension of the gist of it. What this amounts to is a display, a colorful, anarchic deployment of terms and concepts so that, “dazzled by its patina of high-concept abstractness, the imagined reader poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms” (Nussbaum).

Why is the proliferation of bullshit in literary and cultural theory worthy of satirical attack, in the works of Hynes and others? For one thing, seeking to dazzle and confuse is not commensurate with the aims of any thinker, teacher, writer or researcher who is interested in offering interpretations of any object, let alone a literary text. Hyne’s works are not ultimately hostile to the academy. On the contrary, they typically attack vice and excess with the implicit aim of healing an ailing institution, not euthanizing the afflicted. They seek to initiate that trans-paradigmatic dialogue indexed in the introduction of the present piece.

## **Coetzee**

The disintegration of David Lurie, outcast professor of communications and the protagonist of the novel *Disgrace*, is awful to witness, to say nothing of what is visited upon his daughter. In a sense, his plight is emblematic of the inability of the academic to reconcile being intellectually and aesthetically compelled by great





literature or sublime music--or a nubile undergraduate--with taking resolute action in other realms. In other words, Lurie is not as moved by the mundane givens of life as he is by art and ideas and this makes him a stranger to others and, to some extent, himself. It is difficult to imagine a life more abject than that of the psychopomp of dead dogs--the fate that awaits Lurie--except insofar as Coetzee seems to be on Singer's side of the animal rights debate: all creatures, the bedeviled protagonist of this novel included, merit a measure of dignity and compassion, including living creatures dwelling outside the human sphere<sup>39</sup>.

In a sense, *Disgrace* could be understood to pose a significant threat to the argument I am attempting to make. It will undoubtedly be clear to the reader that what is at stake is the very possibility of learning to think, with the aid of literature, about the tension between worlds and selves, never flattering oneself to the extent that a perfect objectivity has been obtained, but remaining open to alternative ways of being and interpreting precisely because of the contingency of one's perspective. David Lurie is woefully inept in this regard. Not only is it the case that he would be sympathetic to Nagel's suggestion that knowing what it is like to be a bat is beyond our ken—he seems to be manifestly incapable of understanding or respecting other modes of existence, even those that are clearly closely akin to his own. Despite this

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<sup>39</sup> Singer avers: "Animal liberation ethics requires that animals enter the sphere of moral concern with a fundamentally equal moral status. No matter what the other characteristics of sentient beings, their interests should be counted equally with the like interests of any other beings" (Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse, *Unsanctifying Human Life: Essays on Ethics*, 132). Lurie's experience moves him into closer proximity with these uncompromising claims, albeit by methodical, grudging inches.



galling deficiency, Coetzee's protagonist does undergo a dramatic metamorphosis in the course of the novel. The very fact that *Disgrace* presents us with a character who seems to be ethically and imaginatively impoverished—at least in the specific sense of empathetic imaginative projection—implies that the marginal progress he makes is that much more valuable; not in spite of, but precisely because of, its relative modesty.

The shift of setting at the midpoint of the narrative is extremely instructive in this regard. As Tom Herron has astutely observed:

Until the moment when, having resigned his post as adjunct professor of communications, David travels out to Lucy's smallholding, this is the extent of animals' presence in the novel [this is an attempt on Herron's part to keep the integrity of his analysis intact, as his primary pre-occupation is with animals in *Disgrace*—in both senses, as a matter of fact]. And why should it be otherwise? Up to this point, the world of the novel has been resolutely urban: we have an academic satire, with lectures and seductions, tribunals and procedures, scandals and dismissals. However, once out of the city—exiled in the Eastern Cape, or “Old Kaffaria”(122) as he calls it, or “darkest Africa”(95, 121) as he also calls it—everything changes when David finds himself in the midst of real and not simply metaphorical animals (477-478).

Actually, everything has not changed to the extent that this assertion implies. David Lurie can certainly be understood to be an academic in exile in the second movement



of Coetzee's novel, but it does not therefore follow that, simply because the familiar confines of the Thinkery have been abandoned—or more exactly, Lurie has been expelled from those confines because a dubious relationship with a young female pupil has moved her to lodge a complaint against him and he has obstinately refused to be apologetic or contrite—that spatial change marks the end of academic satire and the emergence of a distinct narrative mode.

On the contrary, Lurie's exile marks a continuation with a difference: this affords us the opportunity to see the rather dubious protagonist at large, exposed to a world he has neither chosen nor, until a state of utter spiritual abjection is reached by agonizing degrees, shown himself to be prepared to adapt to. It ought to be pressed even more strongly that this unconventional "bait and switch" technique does nothing to raise taxonomical questions about the fitness for inclusion within the confines of the present project of Coetzee's novel, e.g. "Is this *really* a work of academic satire, given the conclusion it reaches and the path that leads to that conclusion?" I would answer this hypothetical with a categorical affirmative because Lurie never ceases to have a cast of mind that is intimately familiar to the attentive reader of academic satire. *Where* he is, to put it baldly, is much less significant than *who* he is and how his character develops in the course of the plot. As Harron has pointed out, all of the familiar formal elements of academic satire are in place at the outset, so that a transition from one represented region to another amounts to nothing more than the



expansion of the set of possible spatio-temporal loci that can play host to academic satire.

Consider, for example, Lurie's early declaration of contempt for the steady erosion of his professional bailiwick. The narrator (about whom more will have to be said momentarily, particularly with reference to the interests and ideas of both Cohn and Lodge concerning the signal significance of free-indirect discourse) supplies this account, mirroring as he does the goings on in Lurie's mind during an encounter with the escort he visits, Soraya:

About his own job he says little, not wanting to bore her. He earns his living at the Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College. Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications. Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one specialized-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale [...] Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul (3-4).





This passage can function as a skeleton key to the complex workings of Lurie's nature. It will probably be obvious that this amounts to a deft invocation of Rousseau, by Lurie and therefore by the ordering intelligence behind his affinities, Coetzee. Lurie's Romantic Idealism is certainly a vital element of his character and the novel, but he could just as easily have disclosed an elective affinity for Goethe, if you will pardon the appropriation of the title of one of the latter's works for the sake of identification. The fact that Rousseau's theory of the genealogy of language is not so much akin to Lurie's as *his* theory, whole bore, goes a long way toward explaining Lurie's obstinate, solipsistic self-absorption, for this was, as you will undoubtedly recall given Paul Johnson's remarks about Rousseau (cited on page 77 of the present project) a feature of the romantic, solitary wanderer as well. Embellishing Johnson's account yet further will serve to cement the correlation:

It was part of Rousseau's vanity that he believed himself incapable of base emotions. 'I feel too superior to hate.' 'I love myself too much to hate anybody.' 'Never have I known the hateful passions, never did jealousy, wickedness, vengeance enter my heart...anger occasionally, but I am never crafty and never bear a grudge.' In fact he frequently bore grudges and was crafty in pursuing them (10).

Dissimulation of this kind is, of course, a lodestone for the satirist, "Dissimulation is the richest source of satire. Pretense and hypocrisy permeate satiric literature because pretense and hypocrisy are, as teen-aged Holden Caulfield learns, inescapable



attributes of man and society” (Feinberg 23). Coetzee’s nose is as keenly attuned to the rank and ubiquitous scent of red herring as that of any satirist, and Lurie is certainly redolent of it. A few words from Rousseau’s own work, *Essay on the Origin of Language*, the second chapter of which is tellingly (for Lurie) entitled, “That the First Invention of Speech Is Due not to Need but Passion,” ought to make the link between the two minds yet more evident:

One can take nourishment without speaking. One stalks in silence the prey on which one would feast [telling, too, given the metaphorical misogyny that Lurie is so fond of]. But for moving a young heart, or repelling an unjust aggressor, nature dictates accents, cries, lamentations. There we have the invention of the most ancient words; and that is why the first languages were singable and passionate before they became simple and methodical (Rousseau 12).

The stage is nicely set: Lurie is clearly a devotee of Rousseau and that serves as an augury of much that he does and says, indeed, much that he omits in terms of both speech and action. Thanks, of course, to the limited omniscience of the narrator of *Disgrace* and the liberal deployment of free indirect discourse within its confines, Lurie’s mind is transparent to the reader’s scrutiny; often, it seems, it is opaque to him.

At one point, after the title has become decidedly more fitting and Lurie’s existence has been painted in unrelentingly gloomy hues for some time, he is



described as follows by the rather austere, dispassionate narrator: “One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy’s kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake...He does not know what is happening to him” (143). An intriguing combination of forces is alive in these words. On one hand, Lurie’s admission of ignorance as to the origins of his sudden distress is as ordinary—and no less painful for it—a turn of events in the dark maze of human psychology as can be imagined; on the other, this seems to signify an inability to squarely face emotional and physical distress on his part. Rather than simply surrender to a tsunami of grief at the endless canine parade to the incinerator that he has observed while working alongside Bev at the animal shelter, Lurie is the incredulous and then analytically oriented observer of his own visceral responses. He is outside of himself a great deal, a tendency that is thrown into dramatic relief by the narrative mode. In this regard, Joseph Bentley has the following trenchant remark to make, albeit focused on the work of Huxley rather than Coetzee:

In the tradition of Aristophanes, Rabelais and Swift, Huxley often evokes the image of man as a totally physiological being, as a grotesque animal preposterously convinced of his own refinement and spirituality. The tension between mind and body occurs so frequently in satire that one is tempted to call radical dualism its essential operational phenomenon (3).



While I certainly concur, both in terms of the ubiquitous dualism in satire and the relevance of this claim to Lurie's own way of being, I would like to emphasize that mocking the strange predicament of a being endowed at once with a corporeal frame and subjective self-awareness is insufficient for most satirists; seeking to reconcile human beings to that strange dichotomy is the logical outcome of mocking those who pretend that it does not exist or foolishly ignore one of its constituents at the expense of the other.

As a case in point, Lurie's marked propensity for thinking as opposed to simply feeling is yet another indicator of his desire to cling to the cerebral detachment characteristic of the professional scholar, and serves as proof of the continuity of the mode of academic satire despite the radical shifts in plot and setting that distinguish *Disgrace* from many of its counterparts.

Moreover, it could well be erroneous to assert that this is a propensity, desire or conscious motive: Lurie is simply habituated to it, and the possibility is left open that he chose academe as a commodious world given this aspect of his own way of being, rather than developing such tendencies while immersed in academic life. A similar tendency to recoil from things bodily—with the obvious exception of objects of sexual desire—can help to explain his paralysis in the face of his daughter's violent rape and, more importantly, its aftermath, as he was trapped by her assailants and set ablaze, thereby (obviously!) being prevented from intervening on her behalf.





Indeed, Lurie exhibits a consistent preference for thinking abstractly and metaphorically about his own desires and drives as well as those of others. As James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington point out:

In many ways the novel can be read as an account of Lurie's interactions with Others. Initially, these interactions, particularly with women, seem readily open to reader critique: they are narrowly selfish (as with his ex-wife), even deluded (as with Soraya, the prostitute) but nonetheless within the bounds of acceptability [to whom, one wonders?]. However, the (moral and legal) consequences of such self-circumscribed interactions with Others are pushed to their further extreme (as is the reader's sympathy) in the account of Lurie's seduction of Melanie Isaacs, his young student. Following one minimally consensual sexual encounter, Lurie again forces himself on Melanie, an act described as follows: "She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her hips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips...Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had desired to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck (140).

This is a disturbing tableau, to be sure, particularly given the resort to the dehumanizing simile in the end. Much can be made of this scenario and is, as the commentary these scholars provide makes plain. While Lurie is not technically a



rapist in the eyes of the law, he has willfully exploited the asymmetrical power dynamics of his relationship with this young woman, his student. It is certainly deplorable to exploit the weak for our selfish pleasure. It is also symptomatic of Lurie's characteristic *ethos* to employ poetic tropes in order to make his misdeed seem romantic, charming, almost to entail a kind of supernatural transformation of himself into a predator and his victim into yielding prey—here, we ought to recall Rousseau's fondness for flights of poetic imagination of the same sort, simultaneously considering Johnson's remarks about his reputed ethical turpitude.

However, what I believe much of the commentary upon this novel and those like it misses is the fact that this deed on Lurie's part is particularly loathsome because he is a lover and teacher of *literature*. That might sound preposterous, but if his avowed aim as a scholar and teacher is to hone his sensitivity to narratives, to impart both the delicious aesthetic intoxication *and* the profound moral wisdom that can be derived from empathetic imaginative projection into the minds and lives of fictional beings who lack the same corporeal immediacy as the young woman he seduces and then, by his own lights, takes advantage of for his own fulfillment, then how can he possibly fail to imagine what it is like to be *her* at precisely the moment *before* he takes from her what he does sense that she is unwilling to yield? I believe *this* is the target of Coetzee's satirical attack, both during this rather repellent scene and its aftermath, when Lurie haughtily proclaims himself to have been witness, in the company of this young woman, as I have mentioned previously in this study, when



“Eros entered” (52). It is a long journey from the brilliant disquisition of Aristophanes in *The Symposium* to this rather cavalier invocation of the deity of love. Lurie is using his erudition and sophistication, his acquaintance with evocative imagery and powerful, ancient ideas, to attempt to paper over what amounted to the rape of a passive victim. If he has learned anything from the study and teaching of literature, why has he not learned that dissimulation is abhorrent to those who create and love it? How can he hide behind this screen of scholarly erudition and aesthetic sensitivity, when his conduct has been so vulgar, so crass, so mindblind, as it were?

Just then, of course, Coetzee shifts the terrain beneath our feet. Through a methodical and deliberate process, he destroys David Lurie before the eyes of the reader. His trials are fit for Job: he loses his position (which, in light of these events, seems warranted—he does not respect the ethical code that his position requires him to observe, nor is he, obviously, as compassionate and empathetically able as his vocation ought to have made him) despite the attempts of his colleagues to move him to express contrition—he was a servant of Eros! (58); he moves to his daughter’s smallholding on the Eastern Cape—shortly thereafter, he is assaulted (93) and imprisoned while his daughter is violently raped.

One exquisite line, “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, will not save him here in darkest Africa,” seems designed to produce a wrenching transition from wry laughter at the absurdity of the scholar taking stock of his resources: “How many languages do I speak? How many publications did I produce last term? How likely is



it that my tenure will be renewed?" in the face of a crisis, as Achilles might test the edge of his sword and recall the hectoring of Hector, followed by aversion to the implications of the final phrase, a grudging disdain for such a thought, despite the circumstances. Here, to render the matter more readily intelligible in terms of the argument advanced in the introduction, is a splendid balancing of the Right and Wrong arguments. It might be argued that dwelling on Lurie's predicament while his daughter is attacked is insipidly insensitive, but Coetzee leaves us no alternative: by virtue of the relentlessly narrow range of the narrative mode, we are trapped in Lurie's mind along with him.

He is immolated (96); a grammatical exercise drifts through his mind as the flames lick at his countenance, "Burned, burnt." (97). Again, one cannot help but be astonished by the juxtaposition of this stark, hideous scene of human suffering and the strange yet all-too-familiar patterns of the pedagogical psyche, even in gravest distress. Startled laughter at the sheer audacity of this scene is difficult to resist: simultaneously, sympathy for this flawed, beleaguered human being and rueful amusement at his pedantic habits surge into the mind.

His daughter survives the attack, but refuses to contact the authorities or indulge his requests that they seek legal help (99). Petrus, an otherwise trustworthy assistant to his daughter on the smallholding, vanishes following the attack. Again, his daughter refuses to heed his inquiries:





“Why didn’t he tell you he was going away? Doesn’t it strike you as fishy that he should disappear at precisely this time?

I can’t order Petrus about. He is his own master” (114).

Lurie is emasculated, ignored, placated. Ultimately, his suspicions will be amply confirmed; though Petrus’ direct complicity in the attack is never confirmed, he witnesses fraternization between one of his daughter’s assailants and the individual in question (131). Again, he pleads with his daughter to seek justice, to confront and accuse the man who violated her. Again, she refuses (133). To cut this summary treatment of the myriad indignities he suffers short, his daughter will carry the child that resulted from the assault to term and marry Petrus, while he spends his days tending to dying animals and fantasizing about an opera that will, if it is completed, only be performed for them (214).

The urgent, disturbing question is: has David Lurie suffered enough? With all of his vices and follies, his pedantic nonsense and mindblindness, can the reader offer him the empathy and compassion that he ultimately learns to bestow on crippled, doomed dogs (Herron 486)? The scholars who were heard to invoke a Levinasian ethical theory earlier have a response:

For many, Coetzee’s “answer,” continual self-questioning [which is Lurie’s response to the assault on his daughter and his own abject despair and impotence in the face of it] in a debate that is concerned with how we relate to Others is entirely too self-directed to count as ethical... [i]n short, Coetzee



does not seek to speak to his readers; nor does he offer comforting, Said moral certainties. Instead, perhaps, he seeks to encourage the reader to self-critique in the performative process of the act of imagination that is reading and from this basis to suggest the political possibilities of an ethical respect for alterity (Melfan and Worthington, 146).

I would argue that it would be symptomatic of exactly the kind of hypocritical self-righteousness that Coetzee launches his satirical bolts against Lurie for to conclude that Lurie's response to the cascade of scalding indignities that has just been catalogued is "...too self directed to count as ethical." Ironically, that would be an apt designation for such a hermeneutical strategy given what the form and content of *Disgrace* harmoniously combine to produce. If satire, indeed, if literary artifacts are imbued with the potential to move us, both in general, cognitive and most importantly *ethical* terms into a realm of trans-paradigmatic criteria, then we ought to be able to summon compassion for Lurie, not because of his characteristically academic frailties, but *because* of them—or what is *Disgrace* for?

## DeLillo

DeLillo delights in vertiginous juxtapositions in *White Noise*. He places the sublime and the ridiculous, the mundane and the magical together, the better to emphasize the



tension between them and the fact that we typically drift lazily, obliviously past it in the course of our ordinary everydayness. Thus, when his protagonist, the improbable but all-too-familiar figure known as Jack Gladney, relates the details of a bizarre conversation with one of his former wives, the reader is subjected to whiplash of the imagination: ‘We’re serious people here. The cycle of history has but four ages. We happen to be in the last of these. There is little time for whimsy.’ Her tiny piping voice bounced down to me from a hollow ball in a geosynchronous orbit” (273).

Reminiscent of that startling match cut in Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey", which blinks from a primitive hominid's clumsily hurled bone to a gleaming space station, this is a common formal effect in the work as a whole. It is tightly tied to the primary theme: the fear of death. *White Noise* has been read as academic satire, and Gladney's post as the head of a fictional department of Hitler Studies, his rambling peripatetic excursions with his mad genius of a colleague, Murray (some of this fellow's musings are weirdly poetic, not least his hermeneutical analyses of automobile collisions and television commercials, to say nothing of his fondness for misshapen no-name peanuts) and his anxiety concerning his limited command of German help to lend credence to such a reading. There can be no doubt, however: DeLillo has crafted an extraordinary literary experiment; a careful meditation on the existential implications of being-towards-death in modern--some wish to say post-modern, but why?--America.



Gladney's wife, Babette, is so obsessed with—and terrified by—the prospect of eventually becoming an un-Babette that she volunteers for a very dangerous pharmaceutical trial. The medication, Dylar, purportedly has the power to completely eradicate the fear of death, to locate and silence that cerebral section that makes us aware of our own finitude. She signs a Faustian bargain, yields to the libidinous lunges of the project leader, yet finds no relief. Gladney finally realizes, thanks to one of the aforementioned dialogues with Murray, that his entire academic career has been an attempt to hide from death behind the enormous, powerful figure of Hitler: "Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom... You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death" (287). This is a withering satirical hex, of course: most academics who build their houses on the slopes of some volcanic mind secretly do so because the noise and light emanating from the great mind obscure the relative triviality of the scholar. What Murray has argued, though, claims many more casualties. He implies that every great project or plan or deed is just a colorful screen the creator props between the void and him or herself. That is the inky, throbbing thought behind the beguiling white noise of DeLillo's novel, the secret breathed out by the horrible toxic cloud unleashed in the eye of the book.





That humming, almost unnoticed but nevertheless mesmerizing prose is just that, by the way. Giving an account of his own delight in the company of his odd little son, Wilder, Gladney asserts: “I liked being with Wilder. The world was a series of fleeting gratifications” (171). This is what the knowledge and fear of his own end snatches from Gladney, and from the reader of *White Noise*.

### **Prose**

Samuel Beckett’s *Watt* contains the following line: “The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good. It is the ethical laugh” (Beckett 48). We, as readers, are often invited to share in this bitter ethical laughter by satire in general and academic satire in particular. To echo Frye’s account once more, satire is distinguished from other literary modes by two features: wit and an object of attack or target. The target is presumably under attack because it is not good, i.e. because the satirist detects something about it that ought to be corrected or redeemed in light of an ethical or moral precept that is militantly defended as the satire unfolds, albeit through the skillful navigation of the *via negativa*. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Academy, that curious environment in which ostensibly sage individuals dispense their wisdom to innocent minds, has been a favorite target of the lively and scathing wit of the satirist. After all, if ideas and values are the essential discursive currency of academics, then their positions must be relatively clear and hence readily discerned targets of satirical attack.



In a contemporary work that echoes Aristophanes' *Clouds* in troubling ways, Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, some vexing questions are raised. Prose conjures a fictional college in the Vermont wilderness, Euston, and makes it the scene of the undoing of Ted Swenson, a typical protagonist of academic satire: aging, cynical, attuned to the soporific dullness of his own dry, rehearsed lectures and yet powerless to restore his dwindling vitality (it is in this sense that Swenson can be readily compared to Kingfisher in Lodge's *Small World*, or indeed to Swallow in the complete triptych; David Lurie and David Kepesh in the works of Coetzee and Roth are also obvious analogs) and resolve. His writing career, once of sufficient luster to win him his teaching position and tenure therein as well as a gargantuan advance for his next novel, is now moribund. Swenson draws some energy from teaching a creative writing seminar, though as the novel opens, it becomes clear that things have taken an odd turn in it: his students' sophomore fiction seems more and more frequently to treat the theme of bestiality.

Swenson finds himself wading through works like "...a student story in which a teenager, drunk and frustrated after a bad date with his girlfriend, rapes an uncooked chicken by the light of a family fridge" (1). Swenson gallantly struggles to extract something of worth from such pieces and in describing his struggle, Prose shows herself to be a canny observer of the often agonizing process of trying to distinguish between a petulant *ad hominem* and a salient technical criticism. The techniques of



the holistic therapeutic facilitator who dreads the kind of reprisal from aggressive students that was described in the foregoing passage from *Ivory Tower Blues* are clearly on display in Swenson's very soft, conciliatory critical analyses, moving him to lament that his options are limited, even when a student produces something that is clumsy in form and as bizarre in content as the passage cited above: "[He] can either keep silent or play the snobbish, elitist spoiler. So what if he's the teacher? Why should his stupid opinions matter?"(8) In an attempt to shield the author of the aforementioned piece on poultry pillage from such subtle critiques from his fellow students as: "Well, he thought about doing it to a chicken. Otherwise he wouldn't have put it in the story" (6); Swenson has recourse to a familiar theoretical mantra: "Mystery writers aren't murderers. Necessarily. And we've gotten into trouble whenever we've assumed that the character is a stand in for the writer" (6). The claim that there is no necessary correlation between an author's biography and the form and content of the fictional worlds she engineers, indeed that the author is "dead" and language speaks through her via a kind of automatic writing, can be traced to Barthes and his critical and theoretical legacy.

Barthes argues that the emergence of the individual as a discrete ontological monad, an autonomous entity or self, can be traced to the same period following the Middle Ages when rationalism, empiricism and the Reformation assisted in the birth of the Author. Barthes is only too happy to preside over the Author's funeral, as "We



know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (149). The Death of the Author allows the Reader to become the locus of polysemy, that pool into which the proliferation of meanings may gush, no longer impeded by the search for an explanation of the work based on the peculiar features of the departed author’s *Lebenswelt*. Rehearsing this now standard dogma might seem superfluous were it not for the fact that *Blue Angel* dwells upon it, focusing our ethical attention as readers on what could result when such notions are misconstrued, exaggerated or bleed over into contexts in which they have no appropriate role. Barthes’ ideas have supplied a powerful prophylactic against myopic pre-occupation with history and biography, to say nothing of naïve intentionalism, in contemporary theory and criticism. Suppose, however, that an author or reader inferred on the basis of conceits of this kind that she was simply an empty vessel for language, a creature without any semblance of a fixed identity or coherent inner life, always inventing worlds and selves without regard for the ethical repercussions of all of this artful invention, even when it constituted outright mendacity and even madness?

Swenson is tempted, manipulated and ultimately crushed by just such an individual. Prose generates the character of the young woman in question, Angela Argo, through a most convincing technique. More precisely, she abandons the





various tools that the narratologist Dorrit Cohn has identified as centrally important to the task of creating what she has dubbed *Transparent Minds* in an eponymous treatise. She describes the minds of fictional characters as being laid bare to our readerly scrutiny in a way that human consciousness never is in ordinary life. Cohn identifies the typical techniques as “1. Psycho-narration: the narrator’s discourse about a character’s consciousness; 2. quoted monologue: a character’s mental discourse; 3. narrated monologue: a character’s mental discourse in the guise of the narrator’s discourse” (14). Prose never provides us with any of the insight that these techniques might yield and Swenson, though he is increasingly enchanted by Angela’s work in his creative writing seminar, really learns nothing about her character or the topography of her inner landscape from it.

Granted, this serves to vindicate the perfectly plausible proposition that it is foolish to insist that the author and her characters are in some sense one and the same; moreover, it is a tribute to the precocious skill and sophistication of Angela’s authorial productions: Swenson is accustomed to being able to quickly penetrate behind a patina of fiction to rather mundane, often ludicrous, details of his students’ own lives. Indeed, he foolishly commits the error that he admonishes his students to scrupulously avoid. He assumes, when Angela invents a protagonist with a mad crush on her music teacher, a Mr. Reynaud, she must be trying to intimate to her creative



writing instructor that the same desires—for *him*, i.e. Swenson—lurk under the polite surface of their classroom rapport.

Swenson, and by logical extension, the reader, can only assemble a portrait of Angela Argo's character by relying upon other sources, one of whom turns out to be Swenson's colleague, Magda, who taught Angela introductory poetry and lived to regret it. When Swenson inquires about the rumored suicide of Angela's father (a scenario that has powerful resonance for Swenson, as his own father's suicide was the inspiration for his highly acclaimed first novel, *Phoenix Time*) Magda replies: "Killed himself? She never mentioned a suicide. You know, Ted, I had the funniest feeling about her. That all of it could have been invented, and *she* might not know the difference" (82).

An inability to distinguish between fiction and reality, as I indicated above, could be the result of a serious psychological malady operating in concert with theoretical arguments to the effect that there is no extra-textual reality as such. If "reality," as ordinary human beings clumsily describe and understand it, is in the last analysis only a matrix of constructed, ideologically charged narratives that are not bound by the dictates of a metaphysics of correspondence, i.e. if there is no way to determine what is supposed to have happened according to a given narrative tested against states of affairs in a public reality that persists beyond the bounds of such narratives, then the



truth of any claim made within one such narrative becomes impossible to confirm or deny, barring resort to some further criterion or standard.

The dangerous implications of this kind of thinking about the virtual impossibility of getting outside of the text have been examined and responded to in a number of ways (which should not be read as a concession in advance to radical, nihilistic perspectivism!). In an extended polemic directed at Baudrillard's theoretical discourse, Christopher Norris has argued:

Baudrillard's alternative is stated clearly enough: "'a hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.' (p. 167) It is a vision which should bring great comfort to government advisers, PR experts, campaign managers... It may be argued that the truth-conditions will vary from one specific context to another; that such episodes [here Norris refers to a diverse range of historical phenomena enumerated earlier, including the Iran-Contra affair or Thatcher's policies vis-à-vis the Falklands] involve very different criteria according to the kinds of evidence available; and therefore that it is no use expecting any kind of generalized *theory* to establish the facts of this or that case. But this ignores the extent to which theories (and truth-claims) inform our every act of rational appraisal, from 'commonsense' decisions of a day-to-day, practical kind to the



most advanced levels of speculative thought. And it also ignores the main lesson to be learnt from Baudrillard's texts: that any politics which goes along with the current postmodernist drift will end up by effectively endorsing and promoting the work of ideological mystification (Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* 190-191).

Norris' passionate defense of *reality* might strike some as hopelessly misguided nostalgia for a simpler, more readily understood world; others could easily complain that, whether because he is reading Baudrillard in translation (all references in Norris' essay are to *Jean Baudrillard: selected writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1980) which represents a very extensive selection of Baudrillard's works to that point) or does not appreciate some subtle nuance of the text, he is offering an apocalyptic caricature of a thinker who would not seriously countenance the inferences made by Norris.

Both of these objections would have merit if they were supported by arguments or evidence. One of the most conspicuous omissions from accounts of reality and truth that reduce them to contingencies that vary according to perspective and therefore are not metaphysically prior to, or more robust than, interpretations of a real phenomenon is the rather obvious—but easily ignored or elided—fact that many perspectives on *one* world, text or event vouchsafe by virtue of their very proliferation and contentious struggle for sovereignty the *a priori* existence of a public world that





can play host to them. The assertion can be made more clearly: it is certainly the case that many perspectives, interpretations and ways of describing and understanding reality exist. What is really fascinating about this—and this cognitive and metaphysical step is sometimes missed—is that these perspectives, narratives, interpretations and so forth can be and are analyzed, compared and criticized by myriad minds. *Where* can this take place, if nothing is *real* outside of a contingent, constructed narrative? Our *a posteriori* ordinary everydayness routinely confirms, provided a modicum of scrutiny, that our perceptions and reality do not always match. Note that in order to infer that, we must have a correspondence theory in mind: I see the paddle bend in the water as I canoe across the pond. A quick assessment of the structural integrity of the paddle (facilitated by the self-same fallible ocular orbs) shows, when it emerges from the water, that it is intact. It must follow that some perspectives afford the observer perceptions that correspond to reality and others do not. What follows is not that nothing is real; instead, what follows is that we ought to subject our perceptions, interpretations and judgments to careful scrutiny before concluding that they are as proximal to the truth as possible.

I will call for some additional aid before I close this digression and return to Prose' *Blue Angel*. I will then explain how these general notions about reality proper as opposed to the fictional world of a given text can clarify the importance of Prose' satirical undertaking.



It is as a result of Angela's capacity to operate in such an amoral fashion, pathologically lying to all about her because she does not see what Foucault has termed the "author-function"<sup>40</sup> as bound to certain kinds of discourse, but free to invent in any context, that she is able to manipulate Swenson, humiliate him and ultimately gut his career by accusing him of sexual impropriety with an innocent young pupil (here too, of course, obvious parallels emerge: the predicaments of David Lurie and Coleman Silk are clear analogs. This inversion of the hierarchy of power is a veritable *leitmotif* of academic satire; it has even supplied the premise for David Mamet's play *cum* film, *Oleanna*). Swenson is certainly no paragon of virtue; when the machinery of seduction begins to move, he succumbs in a scene that is psycho-narrated such that we inhabit his thoughts while those of Angela Argo remain consistently opaque:

It's not as if he doesn't know that if he stays there and doesn't move away, Angela will stand and turn away and they'll be in each other's arm. He knows it, and he doesn't know it, just as he has and hasn't known all along that every word they spoke, every gesture they made was leading to this. Still, he

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<sup>40</sup> The matter is discussed at greater length in Foucault's "What is an Author?" translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977. pp. 124-127. It is worth noting that Foucault's polemic is not as strident as Barthes'.



manages to be surprised, and he watches, as if from a distance, as he kisses Angela Argo (169).

Swenson is insecure and self-absorbed. He is also alerted to the fact that he has been a model of good conduct when the Dean of his rather conservative college holds a seminar on sexual harassment at the beginning of term, insisting as he does so that a kind of neo-puritanical abhorrence of sexuality has infected the political climate of the modern academy—a consistent target of Prose’s satire. Swenson congratulates himself, vainly, at that point: “So what if he read Miss A’s paper first, or looked to see if Miss B got his joke? More often than not, those students worked harder and learned more. And those fleeting...attachments never led any further. Swenson should be canonized! He’s the saint of Euston!”(52), only to fall into exactly the sort of dire situation he had avoided before because the admonitory seminar made him kick himself for being *too* cautious!

The fact that Swenson is not pure and chaste gives the ethical situation that unfolds between him and Angela texture and complexity. It may be the case that she schemed to manipulate and undo him, luring him into bed, demanding that he show her manuscript to an editor and then blackmailing him with a recorded conversation when he returns from meeting said editor with dismal news. What makes the matter more nuanced is the fact that Swenson was complicit and yet simultaneously guilty



and remorseful, detached from events and watching them unfold in out-of-body moments like the one cited above.

Making such judgments is made more difficult by the situation that is played out in *Blue Angel*. Swenson is clearly wrong when he violates professional ethical protocol and, more importantly, when he simultaneously exploits the power dynamics of the pedagogical relationship, which some have likened—in terms of the potential for exploitation of the student by the professor—to the potentially perilous dynamics of the phenomenon of *transference* that can emerge between analyst and analysand in a psychotherapeutic frame of reference<sup>41</sup>.

Yet Prose makes it very difficult to condemn him as a rogue precisely because his conflicted, all-too-human psyche is so convincingly laid bare before us. One of Swenson's own remarks about the experience of reading fiction echoes Cohn's theory: "The strongest story makes us see how we could *be* that kid, how the world looks through that kid's eyes" (11). Regardless of whether the agent in question is guilty of violating victuals by the cold light of a refrigerator or engaging in obviously inappropriate conduct with a student, the text of a fictional world's power to absorb us

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<sup>41</sup> In a controversial monograph on this subject, *Psychotherapy, an Erotic Relationship: Transference and Countertransference* (London: Routledge, 1997) David Mann has argued that in **both** the classroom and the psychotherapeutic milieu, the erotic attachment known as transference in positive terms: "Consider this: it is my proposition that the emergence of the erotic transference signifies the patient's deepest wish for growth...through the erotic, light is shone on the deepest recesses of the psyche." (9) Leaving aside the incendiary potential of this claim, it is interesting to note that a trained, clinical practitioner is eager to point out the revelatory potential of transference. What this experience reveals in the depths of Angela Argo's psyche is, at all events, clearly monstrous.





does seem, in large measure, to depend upon these two factors: permeability or transparency of minds contained therein (or the deliberate leaving opaque of same, as in Angela's case) and the fact that an ethical conflict that lacks an obvious solution informs the action.

The latter can be readily said of *Blue Angel* for several reasons, but the most telling emerges when the inevitable trial before his peers is about to end his career and Angela Argo, transformed true to protean form into a fresh-faced innocent rather than a cunning manipulator, testifies against her instructor. She says: "It really hurt my feelings. I thought Professor Reynaud really liked my book. And then to find out it was just because he wanted to sleep with me—" (307). While this telling slip is invisible to the others present, Swenson realizes that it is proof positive of his accuser's apparent inability to sustain that tenuous membrane between fact and fiction, to remove herself from a realm of invention and acknowledge her moral culpability. *Reynaud* was the music teacher who fell into the Lolita-inspired affair with the young student in Angela's fiction—and the author has dutifully played that role, despite the fact that she had ulterior motives all along. She has no abiding identity or fixed ethical principles, only a series of masks at her disposal to conceal the amoral, ambitious nihilist beneath. The automatic object of our sympathy in such a scenario, she is shown to be far more repugnant than the bumbling Swenson, as is the assumption of his guilt that turns the trial into a farce.



Like Pheidippides in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Angela has learned her lesson only too well, resulting in the doom of her instructor. The lesson, however well-intentioned or useful in context, that no ethical constraint or attention to metaphysical conceits like personal identity or volition and its corollary, guilt, should prevent the artist from allowing language to speak creatively through her, gives her pathological tendencies free reign and allows us to laugh Beckett's bitter, satirical laugh at her and Swenson with Prose, even as we feel compassion for both of these individuals, each with enormous imaginative power; each finally incapable of imagining him or herself into the predicament of the other.



*Chapter IV: Lessons*

...set a curb and a limit to your passion, as also to your greed; have compassion on the impoverished provincials, whose very bones have been sucked dry of marrow;

--Juvenal, Satire VIII: True Nobility.

The process of hermeneutic reworking is called culture, and it has a double articulation. On the one hand, culture names an *identity*. It is the unity of all knowledges that are the object of study; it is the object of *Wissenschaft* (scientific-philosophical study). On the other hand, culture names a *process of development*, of the cultivation of character—*Bildung*. In the modern University, the two branches of this process are research and teaching, and the particularity of the Idealists was to insist that the specificity of the University comes from the fact that it is the place where the two are inseparable. (Readings 64).

It would seem that, when it is created with sufficient sensitivity and deftness, the careful study of literary art can increase our capacity to project ourselves imaginatively into the place of the other. Surely the process of broadening the range



of our moral imagination, to say nothing of refining our aesthetic sensibilities; introducing us to complex and challenging ideas and affording us a modicum of pleasure into the bargain amounts to an extraordinary contribution to Readings' ideal *Bildung*.

Academic satire has a unique and important contribution to make to that process. Even as we engage in the process of empathetically projecting ourselves, via the imagination, into the life-worlds of those who populate academic satires, we are also afforded insight into the culture of that very institution which must facilitate both the critical search for knowledge and the art and science of helping others to cultivate character through the search for it, to say nothing of *their* empathetic imaginations through the study of literature. In addition, regardless of whether that other is a fictional character, a potential victim, or an incomprehensibly alien other, being better able to imagine what he or she is enduring as another fallible, vulnerable, contradictory human will aid us in understanding any interaction that might unfold between self and other. The study of literature, of academic satire, can therefore contribute to both the cultivation of knowledge and of character, of ethical wisdom.

In fact, Lodge has Helen Reed make the following observation about the power of lyric poetry to disclose the peculiar intricacy of subjective states of consciousness as follows:

Let me point to a paradox about Marvell's verse, which applies to lyric poetry in general. Although he speaks in the first person, Marvell does not speak for





himself alone. In reading this stanza we enhance our own experience of the qualia of fruit and fruitfulness. We see the fruit, we taste it and smell it and savour it with what has been called 'the thrill of recognition' and yet it is not there, it is the virtual reality of fruit, conjured up by the qualia of the poem which I could try to analyze if there were world enough and time, to quote another poem of Marvell's - but there is not" (319).

My own pedagogical praxis has confirmed these assertions: moments of exceptional fecundity occasionally appear in mundane guises when meditating on lyric poetry as a portal to the mind, as a way of imparting the "thrill of recognition" that comes from recognizing another mind recognizing itself as such. Not only does this vindicate Helen Reed's analysis; it shows that what Lodge is steadfastly intent upon celebrating, what Nelson Humboldt cleaves to at the last, is the capacity of careful reading of literary artifacts to illuminate the strange fascination of being aware of our awareness that is fundamentally human.

As a case in point, consider the fact that I recently attempted to explain to a group of students the extent to which Dickinson's poem, "Tell All the Truth, But Tell it Slant," could be said to confirm the assertion that in works of extraordinary artistic merit, form and content operate harmoniously and echo and amplify one another. My own contemplation of lyric poetry in this regard turned out, I believe, to affirm and yet expand upon Helen Reed's analysis—to be faithful to it by betraying it. In the course of said discussion, I overheard one of my students as, in a tone evocative of



Job or Sisyphus, he asserted: “Like, I don’t get this shit.” Here the juxtaposition of the scatological and the sublime that is so much a feature of satire from Swift through Prose (plundering poultry as fodder for serious fiction?!) makes itself felt. I was and am profoundly grateful for this unsolicited gift, as it affords me the opportunity to seriously grapple with a commonplace assertion (including an equally, albeit lamentably, ubiquitous attempt to transform the word “like” into a sort of colloquial condiment of the passive voice, as opposed to a preposition, noun, or verb) that has unusual value. In fact, this remark issues a challenge that I intend to accept. What follows, keeping Lodge’s *Thinks...* in mind, is an argument to the effect that Dickinson’s poem, “The Brain is Wider than the Sky,” constitutes the very antithesis of mere muck.

Moreover, I will argue that we ought to cultivate the conviction necessary to assert that this specific lyric poem is both beautiful and affords the attentive reader an opportunity to experience the sublime. To fortify this claim I will have to bring reason and poetry together, much as they unite in the Thinkery of Aristophanes. Finally, to construe “get” as a synonym of “understand,” I will argue that “The Brain is Wider than the Sky” can supply the reader with the sort of startling insight into what it is like to be a being who is aware and simultaneously aware of her awareness—recall that this is a pressing problem throughout *Thinks...*—that lyric poetry is equipped to give the reader afresh or to “re-present” through the complimentary processes of defamiliarization and re-contextualization. In short, this



poem, methodically thought through, makes the very experience of “getting it” both startlingly familiar and the portal to what Kant has dubbed a sublimely boundless realm of kindred presentations; it shows what all the excitement is about when characters in academic satire wax rapturous about literature.

To contend first with the obvious ontological problem posed by the likening of exceptional verse to excrement, I am moved to call on Harry Frankfurt once again—there, by the way, is a name to conjure with: visions of hirsute sausages that could keep a team of Freudian analysts busy for months crowd into the imagination thanks to this nomenclature—and his infamous treatise, *On Bullshit*, for aid. In attempting to supply a working knowledge of bullshit and a means of parsing the distinction between the production thereof and other speech acts, Frankfurt avers: “Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case certainly not wrought.” (Frankfurt 22) It ought to be obvious—but clearly is not so, given the foregoing plaintive cry—that Dickinson’s poem is carefully wrought, as both its formal structure and content attest persuasively. This is readily confirmed: after all, this poem has modest dimensions in spatiotemporal terms: it consists of but a dozen lines arranged into three formally identical quatrains. It contains a metrical pattern that is recognizable and recurring, shifting between quadrupedal and tripodal locomotion for the duration. Rhyme also makes itself felt herein: one deviant stands out from a cordial couple on a consistent basis, such that the second and fourth lines



of each stanza are in audible accord, while the first and fourth remain alone. This tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity is perfectly in keeping with the content of each stanza: comparisons are essayed in all of them; two declare the brain to be vaster than the other entity in question and the last leaves open the tantalizing possibility that the difference between God and the brain may be merely apparent as opposed to real. If the difference is real, it is so only insofar as it is equivalent to a difference of kind between speech and the symbolic system it is, enlivened through enunciation. This work is adroitly wrought in a way that is readily grasped: an organizing intelligence contrived it rather than excreting it like so much mental manure. In fact, readerly resuscitation discloses that the poem, whether audited or visually apprehended—ideally a synthesis of the two attends the act of reading—literally rocks, moving there and back again in a regular pattern amenable to both pronouncing parts and meditating minds. Keeping this contrapuntal motion of matter and manner in mind is mete, for Dickinson's own verse—in "There is a Certain Slant of Light,"—offers us the cryptic claim that internal difference is the abode of meaning. As I will confirm presently, the art measures up to this largely unacknowledged legislation of the poetic perfectly.

It ought to be clear by now that there is more of craft than crap before the reader in this context. My subsequent claims now demand defending. To characterize something as beautiful implies, if we focus for the nonce upon the Kantian account alone, that the object so described, whether artificial or natural, offers





sweet repose to the mind. Kant asserts, in the ninth section of the second moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* in his *Critique of Judgment*, under the heading “Explanation of the Beautiful resulting from the Second Moment,”: “The beautiful is that which pleases universally without requiring a concept” (Townsend 174). Clearly, what this definition boasts in terms of elegance and terseness, it lacks in terms of easy intelligibility. After all, the implication seems to be that beauty and pleasure are linked, but that the pleasure derived from beauty is in some sense universal and not dependent upon some concept but derived from pure feeling. It is important to emphasize that a judgment of taste like the one that I made above, i.e. “Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘The Brain is Wider than the Sky,’ is beautiful,” fulfills each of the conditions that are offered up in this definition. By explaining why that is so, I hope to essay an explanation of both the arguments made by Kant and the judgment itself. It will then remain to argue that the poem also affords the reader an opportunity to experience the sublime and then to say a word or two, with what might appear to be a peculiar digression concerning bats, about the capacity of this poem to lay bare the strange familiarity—and the familiar strangeness—of being aware and aware of one’s awareness. To leap ahead for an instant and then retreat, “But no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something that it is like to *be* that organism.”(Nagel 160) It will be my closing contention that Dickinson’s poem affords us some insight into what it is like to be a subject singing about her own problematic, fascinating sentence.



To take the elements of the judgment concerning the beauty of the poem in order, then: 1. Beauty is, according to the Kantian account, bound up with pleasure. Unlike other sources of the feeling of pleasure, e.g. gratification and goodness, the pleasure that flows from the beautiful is not polluted by any interest. Gratification, which flows from the satisfaction of some desire, is obviously the result of interest. It was my desire to discuss the complex and fulfilling process of contemplating philosophy and poetry together in these pages. That desire is being fulfilled as I write, and therefore, thanks to your patient and solicitous participation in the role of reader, I am experiencing pleasure. Goodness, which can be either theoretical or practical, i.e. good in itself, corresponding to its concept, or good for something, i.e. useful, derives from a correspondence between the way something ought to be—including, potentially, some objective standard—and the way it is. Goodness presents another source of pleasure that is bound up with interest. In Kant's own account, we find the following elucidation: "Even in the judging of health we may notice this distinction. It is immediately pleasant to everyone possessing it (at least negatively, i.e., as the absence of all bodily pains). But in order to say that it is good, it must be considered by reason with reference to purposes, viz. that it is a state which makes us fit for all our business"(Kant 43). Something apart from health itself makes it good, then: its capacity to make us capable of the attainment of goals external to it, or the pursuit of purposeful projects which have boasting of it as a necessary prerequisite, which then



vouchsafe it as good and make it a source of pleasure thanks to the attainment of some end. What then, is *interest* in this specific context?

According to Kant, "...to wish for something and to have a satisfaction in its existence, i.e. to take an interest in it, are identical" (Kant 43). This implies that whatever we have an interest in gives us something that we desire or instantiates in itself something that we wish to be. Townsend carefully distinguishes finding something interesting and having an interest in it in the Kantian sense as follows:

Interest is what an individual or group gets or hopes to get from some object or action. It is used in the sense of possession or benefit, not curiosity. If I have an interest in a piece of property, in this sense, I own some part of the property. I am not expressing my curiosity about what the property is like. Thus interest involves desire, and it includes a desire for the existence of some object. It makes no sense to say that I could own or benefit from something that does not exist. The aesthetic is prior to all practical concern, however, so the aesthetic is 'disinterested.' For someone to be disinterested means that neither desires nor even the existence of the object matter in the judgment (Townsend 157).

While this can prove to be a vexing element of Kant's philosophical aesthetics, it need not do so if we consider the matter from the perspective thus afforded us. I do not have an interest in the poem in question in the sense that its existence fulfills some desire I harbored in advance of encountering it, nor does its existence offer me any



profit or practical benefit. We ought to bear in mind, at last, that a judgment like the foregoing, eminently germane—perhaps excessively German, too?—to the present project, is simultaneously subjective and universal. Kant argues:

E.g., I describe by a judgment of taste the rose that I see as beautiful. But the judgment that results from the comparison of several singular judgments, “Roses in general are beautiful,” is no longer described simply as aesthetical, but as a logical judgment based on an aesthetical one. Again the judgment, “The rose is pleasant” (to use) is, although aesthetical and singular, not a judgment of taste but of sense. It is distinguished from the former by the fact that the judgment of taste carries with it an *aesthetic quantity of universality*, i.e. of validity for everyone, which cannot be found in a judgment about the pleasant (Kant 50).

One might recoil from the apparent attempt implicit in these lines to legislate taste universally, particularly within the confines of a contemporary nexus of cultural and historical forces that has laid siege to the smallest whisper concerning a universal of any kind, a grand narrative or complete and comprehensive system of value or meaning. Who are you, you ancient Königsbergian crackpot, you grizzled grey eminence amongst the snide and condescending dead white male architects of an





outmoded order, to tell me that I must agree that this rose you speak of is not only beautiful to or for you, but beautiful for all, myself included<sup>42</sup>?

It is possible to think about this matter differently. Recall the bootless cry with which this discussion opened and the clumsy structure of it, all passivity and reluctance to say anything with conviction. If I may transpose the signal segment the better to illustrate the point immediately at hand, one can easily imagine the original orator saying, “Like, this is beautiful, I guess, or whatever.” This intimates, at best, that the individual who utters these words in this pathetic pattern stands in some remote, reluctant relationship with the Königsbergian cogitator who makes the judgment of taste, unequivocal and at once subjective and universal, “This rose that I see is beautiful.” What, then, does this judgment mean? Does Kant impute to it the power to bind and loose individual tastes always, a tyrannical malevolence?

On the contrary, the implication of this special sort of judgment is that all other entities constituted as I am ought to, but are not bound by definition or law to, enter into accord with me as to the pleasure that flows from the harmonious and peaceful state of the understanding and the imagination that the form of this singular

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<sup>42</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan has offered compelling arguments for the salience and reality of literary universals. He asserts, for example: “Hegemonic universalism involves the imposition of one set of local interests, beliefs, standard practices etc., on everyone else, the absolutizing of a local law or custom, in such a way as to express and foster domination. Empathic universalism, in contrast, is based on the assumption that all people share ethical and experiential subjectivity, and that universality must both derive from and contribute to this sense of shared subjectivity [...]”(4) I think this is an extremely useful distinction that helps to explain the deontic universality of Kantian aesthetic judgments and also the capacity of literary artifacts to evoke empathy for characters who are engineered to appear to share human subjectivity. Imposing one law universally and discovering universal properties of human subjectivity are very different propositions.



object occasions. In an argument concerning the possibility of aesthetic solidarity based on the comparative analysis of Lyotard and Kant's respective positions on this score, Vandenabeele distills things thus:

The *disinterestedness* of aesthetic pleasure does not exclude its subjective universal validity or the possibility of universal agreement and togetherness. "This sunset is beautiful" does not mean that this sunset in effect offers me pleasure but rather that everyone should (ideally) judge this sunset as beautiful. This togetherness is *deontic*: everyone *ought* to agree, not everyone *will* agree (19).

Thus the aesthetic judgment in question is the active subjective voice shouting loudly enough so that all those who have ears can hear; not only in some specific spatio-temporal context, not only given the whole chorus of contingencies, conditions and contentious idiosyncratic givens of the moment is this poem beautiful—it is that for me, but it ought to be that for all. One need not obey or concur, but the implication is that one ought to, and if the cry I adduced at the outset is a craven coward woven into words, surely such a judgment is a lion in language.

A poem is no rose or sunset. Kant's argument concerning art runs this way: Beautiful art shows its superiority in this, that it describes as beautiful things which may be in nature ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, the devastations of war, etc. may [even regarded as calamitous] be described as very beautiful, as they are represented in a picture. There is only one kind of



ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites disgust. For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might (Townsend 182).

This is a crucial claim, for it naturally opens a clearing in the thicket of Kant's argument for thinking about the sublime and the possibility that it finds a suitable abode *inside* the formal unity of the manifold that distinguishes beautiful art from lesser things.

In order the better to communicate the commitment I want to make here, I would invite you to consider just the first line of Dickinson's poem, which editorial and scholarly convention co-operate in making the mutely numbered work's name: "The Brain is wider than the sky," is a formal unity of manifold elements that appeals at once to the understanding and the imagination and thus passes a poetic pleasure, purposive only in autotelic terms (here the specter of another ancient sage, Archibald MacLeish, might chortle; its being what it is suffices, the poem is, cut print) to us. Its form, the spatio-temporal arrangement of the microcosmic manifold of words it is, mirroring as it does the synthesis of the pure a priori categories of the understanding that are the necessary pre-conditions for experience at all in the macrocosm of the world, pleases. What it contains, however, is a society of symbols most sublime. Feel the back-stretched Heraclitean tension of the bow of the imagination, drawn



taught between the brain, symbol of consciousness, of memory, dream and reflection, of mind, whose vehicle is a wet grey mass of cells more numerous than the stars of our native galaxy. What a vertiginous, anxiogenic depth opens in the imagination between brain and sky, the more so given the metaphorical message: merely apprehending the sky is insufficient; I will send you out to the remotest horizon of consciousness and say that the sky stops before it does; that in apprehending a given infinite magnitude, you include yourself in it—you conceive an incalculable vastness and always already have yourself, caught whole, inside that conceiving. The brain perceives its perceiving of that vastness. What better way poetically to disturb the comforted, to take what is most familiar and make it appallingly odd: there is a subjective world inside this silver sponge of sentient stuff. We are inside the brain along with the sky, as it were.

It might seem bizarre or even heretical to claim that there is room for the sublime inside a poem. After all, is it not the case that we can only experience the sublime when pleasure and pain are mingled, when a formless vastness of scale or dynamic power beggars the imagination, rampages through its horde of images and still issues a demand nothing can satisfy? When the empirical subject quivers with mingled dread and wonder at a spectacle too huge to be encompassed, or a storm so thrilling in its smashing force that it gives humanity the name of impotent, ineffectual weakness by comparison, is that not the sum and substance of the sublime? How







could any mere artificial representation, no matter the genius who contrived it, hope to harness this awful idea, this limit case of aesthetic and intellectual experience?

Dickinson has done it, I believe, and she is not alone. Signifier parts from signified dramatically in the case of Kirk Pillow. Despite the softness the name invites us to expect, he has advanced the following, sharp argument:

Kant depends on the separation of form and material content to differentiate his characterizations of the beautiful and the sublime. The element of formedness applies mainly to the beautiful object: “The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in its having boundaries; but the sublime, on the other hand, can also be found in a formless object, insofar as *unboundedness* is presented in it, or brought to presentation as a result of it, while yet the thought of its totality is added to this unboundedness...” If we pursue the possibility that aesthetic judgments of both the beautiful and the sublime may apply to one and the same work, then the judgment of the sublime in the work will attend to some unbounded aspect of this formally bounded entity. What might this aspect be? We know that the sublime in its unboundedness cannot be limited by any determinate form, since for Kant the sublime concerns rational (intellectual or moral) ideas. He maintains, however, that though for ideas of reason “no adequate exhibition is possible [that is, they cannot be given a determinate form], through this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility, they are aroused and called



to mind. A presentation with a beautiful form can exhibit, by its very formedness, the inadequacy of any form to capture the unboundedness of rational ideas. In turn, the symbolization of ideas of reason in a sensuous presentation corresponds to what Kant calls aesthetic ideas...thus for Kant a formally beautiful work of art may exhibit aesthetic ideas which remain unbounded in themselves despite their exhibition in a frame of determinate form (446).

Move to the next juxtaposition in Dickinson's lyric if you will, the better to appreciate the audacious plausibility of Pillow's point, an oxymoronic formulation in itself. Symbolically, the brain's spongiform porosity has all of the thirst necessary to drink the sea. The persona proclaims: "The one the other will absorb, /As sponges buckets do." Another vastness is drunk up by the mind, again a boggling symbolization of the uncanny power of cognition bubbles up. The brain is once more a metaphor, a symbolization of the thrilling horror of thinking: I can hold the sea in the sponge of my sentient cells. A riot of kindred presentations is unleashed: the brain devouring worlds, putting out the Sun with a blink (to nod to the metaphysical might of Donne) or gelding grim Death, giggling the while. I suspect that this is precisely what Pillow is driving at when he cites Kant again, the more swiftly to reach his destination:

The flood of allusion and implication set loose by the aesthetic idea provides for imagination "a multitude of kindred presentations." (Ak. 315), which it apprehends as an expanding series. Yet when the imagination seeks to *comprehend*



this multiplicity as a whole, the unbounded wealth of the aesthetic idea soon overwhelms it. Kant's account of the mathematical sublime perfectly captures this overwhelming quality of the aesthetic idea:

[W]hen apprehension has reached the point where the partial presentations of sensible intuition that were first apprehended begin to expire in the imagination, while yet it proceeds to the apprehension of further ones, the imagination then loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other; and so there is a maximum in comprehension beyond which it cannot go..." And precisely in this phenomenon of the imagination finding itself "inadequate for exhibiting the idea of a whole" (Ak. 252), lies the experience of the sublime. In sum, though the form of an aesthetic presentation may be judged by taste [may be judged to be beautiful, in other words, for the faculty of taste does just this] reflection on its content instead requires a judgment of the sublime (455)

Look at the first line of the final stanza in this light: "The Brain is just the weight of God," and let the myriad manifestations of the deity pour over the banks of the stream of your consciousness: here are Anubis and Apollo, Hephaestus and Hanuman, Thor and Thoth, even Dionysus, that god so central to *The Secret History*. No one image will exhaust the vast realm of kindred presentations thus unleashed; yet the understanding apprehends this over-abundance; it shares the figurative mass of God at least insofar as each time one of the blizzard of potential names is spoken, it has tried and knowingly failed to measure up.



What is caught in this clever net of ink, engineered with the guile of an Odysseus who constructs a formally beautiful steed that conceals in its dreadful belly an insatiable host of aesthetic ideas, each a conduit of the sublime, is nothing less than thought figuring itself poetically. Seeking to better understand Dickinson's relationship with the sublime, Jed Deppman discovered this trove of insight in the works of Gary Lee Stonum:

...in his 1990 book of the same name, "The Dickinson Sublime," Stonum found that Dickinson's poems responded well to Thomas Weiskel's 1976 structuralist study of the sublime experience during the Romantic period. In Weiskel's analysis of "the orthodox romantic sublime," the experiential structure of most philosophical (e.g. Burke and Kant), literary (e.g. Wordsworth and Byron), and other versions of sublime experience written during the romantic period could be boiled down to three phases. He describes the first stage of any experience as simple being-there: one is as one is, minding one's business, moving unproblematically through the ordinary routines of individual life. The second stage is traumatic: one is suddenly overwhelmed or uplifted by an exciting, ecstatic experience. Perhaps one feels as if the top of one's head has been taken off, or one loses conceptual control and sense of self. The third stage is reactive: one gains or regains a new coherence, a clearer view, and a (re)affirmation of totality, individuality, order and identity (6).





It is this last phase of the tripartite process of Dickinson's sublime that correlates with Nagel's argument, treated of above. Coming to understand what it is like to be another is what Dickinson's poem moves us to do: through beautiful form we are lured into the orbit of the sublime aesthetic idea of thought in all its vastness, of the inadequacy of any symbol to the task of encompassing mind. Wildly intense imaginative play with imagining, thinking about thought is made possible within the formal parameters of this artifact. Indeed, it is possible to imagine any otter or orangutan, let alone a bat, training its ocular orbs on the overarching celestial vault. This is an invisible seeing, though. We can only, as in the hilarious parodic project mentioned above, imagine what it might be like to be a human thinking in the hide of that other creature. In Dickinson's poem, however, we have access to a mind to which we are not blind, singing of its apprehension of its own sight and the breadth of its own brain, sufficient to swallow seeing itself sublimely. Literary narratives have the same capacity and therefore, while his characters meditate on the opacity of other minds, Lodge is making the minds engaged in that meditation transparent.

Granted, these are the minds of fictional characters, but they are generated by the authors I have considered and set into motion in such a way that the crisis of the self is made to look somewhat ridiculous—dialogue between characters, and between a text constructed by an encoding authorial mind and a decoding, readerly mind is always already underway, even as the nature and limits of that dialogue are being



debated by the characters inside the fictional world. Academic satire laughs, or invites us to laugh, by turns sympathetically and derisively, at our desperate struggles, the kind of failed romance that Womack and others rightly identify in these works, because seen from without and within as only literature can allow us to do, opposites are mutually constitutive, alike with a difference, faithful enough to betray.

At last, in light of these considerations, we ought to consider Norris' oft-mentioned claims concerning this nebulous matter known as "trans-paradigm" criteria. Norris explains:

I have perhaps said enough already—in connection with Lyotard—to indicate why I think this is a wrong-headed, pernicious doctrine. My point is that the ethical bearing of these arguments—whether Winch's about witchcraft, Lyotard's about holocaust revisionism, or Feyerabend's about the Catholic Church contra Galileo—cannot (or should not) be divorced from their status as epistemological claims about the scope and limits of human knowledge concerning matters of scientific truth or historical fact. Any doctrine, such as Lyotard's, that raises the 'differend' between cognitive and evaluative judgments to a high point of absolute (quasi-Kantian) principle is sure to generate normative confusions of the kind that I have remarked upon here. At any rate, there are several good reasons for rejecting the cultural relativist approach both with regard to cognitive (scientific or factual) truth-claims, and with respect to differences of evaluative (ethico-political) judgment. They



include, for instance, Donald Davidson's well-known argument—in his essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'—to the effect that talk of divergent language-games, discourses, life-forms, paradigms or ontological frameworks is strictly unintelligible unless it is assumed—which would seem *ex hypothesi* ruled out—that we *do* in fact possess some interlingual or trans-paradigm criteria for making comparisons between them (Norris 43).

I deemed it extremely important to offer up this very elegant, impassioned argument because, in the end, it supplies a means of immunizing both the careful student of academic satire and the careful student of the world at large and him or herself against mindblindness, faith without betrayal, repetition that is merely that. If one thing echoes from Aristophanes to Prose, it is the proposition that no matter how beguiling an idea, a theory, a work or an individual, we must always be ready to reckon with the source of our percepts—to put the matter as generally as possible—with reference to something *outside* of the idea, theory, work or individual. We must be ready to hear and to follow but with that Derridean counter-signature in mind, that irony and mockery of vice combines with the celebration of comic charm to elicit.

Reading works of academic satire is always already a source of insight on this score, because they invite us into fictional worlds with the aim of exploding folly, vice, dissimulation, pomposity, verbal prestidigitation and jargon-mongering in view. They focus on worlds whose denizens have as their ostensible aim the simultaneous cultivation of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* and eagerly, often joyfully disclose those



moments when those denizens fall short, when they forget or ignore who they are, and what they ought to be up to. We must always be ready to generate that *third*, that clearing between appearance and reality, where ethical deliberation takes place. We ought to seek, in Booth's words, the opportunity *to* reflect, rather than passively succumb to the temptation to become mere mirrors, obedient parrots, of whatever or whoever we encounter, in or outside of fictional worlds. We ought to try on fresh sets of sensations in order thereby to discover who we are, and who we might become. We ought to do so also because ignorance of the other *is* ignorance of the self, for they are mutually constitutive, like the Right and Wrong of Aristophanes, or Zapp and Swallow, or Lurie and his student, or his lame canine familiar.

Yet, it would seem too earnestly reductive; too evangelical to proclaim that literature is a panacea for the host of psychological and moral ills to which human beings are the heirs. What is most remarkable about literature in which characters are rendered with sufficient vividness and texture is that these characters are by nature prone to present challenges to those who wish to sort the world into absolute binary categories of goodness and evil, humanity and inhumanity, us and them. Literature of this sort does not so much offer to magically solve human problems as to lay them bare, to grant us fresh insight into their complexity.

In a similar spirit, the British novelist Ian McEwan attempts to make sense of the events of 9/11 in terms of a failure of the moral imagination. He writes: "If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the





passengers, they would have been unable to proceed...Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and the beginning of morality"(Gartner 1). McEwan points to the impossibility of carrying out such an abominable course of action, provided that one is capable of the kind of compassionate response that flows from projecting oneself imaginatively into the place of the other.

In more precise, clinical language, Albert Bandura makes the following claims about the psychological mechanisms of dehumanization<sup>43</sup> that can open the way for failures of the imagination:

The strength of self-censuring reactions to injurious conduct depends partly on how the perpetrator views the people toward whom the harmful behavior is directed. To perceive another human person as human enhances empathetic or vicarious reactions through perceived similarity. The joys and suffering of similar persons are more vicariously arousing than are the joys and sufferings of people who are strangers or who have been divested of human qualities.

Personalizing the injurious effects experienced by others also makes their

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<sup>43</sup> George Steiner has argued that language can have the opposite effect, of course. His indictment of the tendency of Heideggerian ontologically oriented discourse to facilitate dehumanization is withering: "This motif of dehumanization is key. Nazism comes upon Heidegger precisely at that moment in his thinking when the human person is being edged away from the centre of meaning and being. The idiom of the purely ontological blends with that of the inhuman" (Steiner 263). While this could be construed as a challenge to my insistence upon the humanizing effect of language in general and the literary language of satire and other modes in particular, I believe that it serves instead to emphasize that theoretical jargon poses threats to just this feature of language that satirists have sought to attack within the very confines of literary narratives, as my discussion of Hynes above helps to show.



suffering much more salient. As a result, it is difficult to mistreat humanized persons without risking self-condemnation (Bandura 180).

Bandura's remarks could be dismissed as somewhat obvious, save for the obviously less than universal acknowledgement of their moral implications. Both the psychologist and the novelist—comporting themselves co-operatively in this context (admittedly at my behest) as Ralph Messenger and Helen Reed did in Lodge's *Thinks*—just cited cooperate in insisting upon the basic significance of the imagination, of vicarious and empathetic responses, for morality. Both acknowledge that dehumanization can and does entail the strangulation of the imagination, and therefore they lend support to the claim that activities and artifacts that strengthen the imagination deserve close study and cultivation

In her ambitious study, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum has supplied a working definition of compassion that should help to bring about a rectification of names, as it were, a more precise definition of terms. What is meant by compassion, and how does the imaginative effort required to feel compassion for others, particularly fictional characters, fortify our moral imaginations such that they are less likely to fail us when we risk lapsing into the dehumanization of the other? Nussbaum argues that compassion entails certain cognitive elements as well as the feelings that attend upon them. She enumerates them as follows:



Compassion, then, has three cognitive elements: the judgment of *size* (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of *nondesert* (this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself) and the *eudaimonistic judgment* (this person or creature is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted). Finally, let us recall that, like all emotions directed at living beings, compassion frequently either contains or is linked to a non-eudaimonistic element of *wonder* (Nussbaum 323).

Now, permit me to anticipate some objections. First, the eudaimonistic judgment as Nussbaum defines it would seem to pose a serious problem. How can I see *every* other human being as an important element in my scheme of goals and projects, simply on the basis of the proneness of said entities to suffering? Some might understand this to be a desirable concession to psychological plausibility (*vide* Bandura above), such that it is, barring the cases of saints and other super-human fonts of compassion, impossible to feel compassion for *everyone*. On the other hand, it is the case that Nussbaum has argued that once we recognize the similarity of possibilities that obtains between ourselves and other human beings, if not other entities on a larger scale, then we can imagine ourselves in their situations and see the prevention of interference with their well being as a good way to ensure that, should we share their situation, we would be similarly treated. This really amounts to an adaptation of



Aristotle, but to say that an argument is not entirely original is not to say that it is therefore invalid.

Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to advance an argument that shares a great deal with Nussbaum's without sharing her enthusiasm for Aristotelian metaphysics or the eternal verities of human nature. In his controversial epigraph, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Rorty has made claims about the power of literature as a means of hastening moral progress that are framed in a distinctly anti-essentialist, pragmatic vocabulary. He avers,

Within a liberal metaphysical culture the disciplines which were charged with penetrating behind the many private appearances to the one general common reality—theology, science, philosophy—were the ones which were expected to bind human beings together, and thus to help eliminate cruelty. Within an ironist culture, by contrast, it is the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic which are assigned this job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do (Rorty 94).

What Rorty is indexing here is the capacity of literature to give us the capacity to imaginatively project ourselves into the painful predicament of another without relying upon anything else but *the description* of that predicament for the effect.





Despite the fact that she seldom resorts, particularly in the course of her analysis of compassion, to metaphysical postulates or talk of the soul, as the foregoing excerpt from her work attests, Nussbaum does see our common human nature, both physical and metaphysical, as the ground of compassionate responses. Rorty indicates that literature of the sort described above can render discussions of human nature and metaphysics redundant, because it accomplishes the same tasks more effectively and more elegantly.

Much of Rorty's polemical energy is discharged in the service of opposing the desire to "get behind" such descriptions to the fundamental truths which they ostensibly disclose. By Rorty's lights, such fundamental truths are nothing more than entirely contingent, historical phenomena which could just as easily be otherwise. He indicates that human beings often make judgments about other human beings that tend to promote human solidarity, i.e., approximate the acknowledgement of sufficient similarity between people to indicate that they should not be treated cruelly, if they share some salient, contingent feature(s) in common. In the course of a comparative analysis of the treatment of Jews by Danes and Belgians during the Second World War, Rorty argues that the Danes who acted compassionately probably did so on the basis of something other than their philosophical or religious convictions. He asks, "Did they say, about their Jewish neighbors, that they deserved to be saved because they were fellow human beings? Perhaps sometimes they did, but surely they would usually, if queried, have used more parochial terms to explain why they were taking



risks to protect a given Jew—for example, that this particular Jew was a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union...” (Rorty 190)

The sort of practical, sober concession to how human beings ordinarily comport themselves that is in evidence here could well contribute to the persuasiveness of Rorty’s argument, even if it simultaneously diminishes his capacity to be as optimistic about the power of literature to expand the scope of our moral imagination as Nussbaum so clearly is.

Regarding the subject of fictional characters of the sort that academic satirists so carefully craft, it is noteworthy that one of the main points of interest and agreement in both Nussbaum and Rorty’s theories is the idea that all of these judgments about compassion and human solidarity can be made about the characters in narrative fiction, and therefore, the characters in academic satires. Provided that we proceed ‘as if’ these individuals were actually corporeal beings as opposed to elaborate lattices of ink--something that attentive reading generally entails--this seems quite plausible. Just as we can imagine what it might be like to share the predicament of another individual that we encounter in the flesh, we can imagine what the characters endure in terms of its seriousness or triviality. We can, based upon our antecedent familiarity with the acts and experiences of the character, judge whether or not the ills that befall them are deserved, and we can judge eudaimonistically that, in their position, we would feel anguish, and wish that that anguish might be relieved.



In the course of defending Nussbaum's philosophy of literature, Cora Diamond lends credence to the assertion that literary characters may be understood to be as worthy of compassion or inclusion within the sphere of human solidarity as corporeal entities. In an effort to make the ideas of Iris Murdoch more intelligible, and to link them to Nussbaum's project, she explains

She [Murdoch] says of Hare's view of novels [that they are only universal prescriptions that never concern individuals] that it is a strange view, since we *imagine* fictional characters as concrete individuals. If our information about them is limited, that is also true of the real people we know; and what information we have is 'endlessly open to reinterpretation' (Diamond 41).

The gist of Diamond's exegesis of Murdoch's point is quite clear: there are no *prima facie* differences between the sorts of knowledge we have about fictional and corporeal characters that cannot be understood in terms of the quantity of knowledge that we have, which is never complete in either case. Therefore all of the cognitive elements that are requisite for experiences of compassion according to Nussbaum's theory are present in our thinking about fictional characters, as are those contingencies which combine to form the thick descriptions which foster human solidarity according to Rorty.

Further, Diamond makes an interesting observation about the difference between literary language and other kinds of discourse through the use of an odd



illustration: the self-identical status of ducks. She indicates that there is something curious and crucially important in moral terms about the kinds of reading that might issue from seemingly tautological statements, for example:

Every Duck himself is, and himself alone. De la Mare is expressing and also teaching a kind of understanding of individual life, a kind of response to it.

Every duck is *that* duck, is *himself*: [the same goes for bats, of course] a feeling for that can be in the child's attention to these creatures, and can thus also be in the child's ways of acting, in our ways of acting. The sense of life in the poem, the sense of the mystery of *this* feathered creature, with *his* one life, is akin to the sense of the mystery of individual human life felt by Wordsworth in the crowded streets of London: 'The face of every one that passes by me is a mystery': *each is himself*, this man, with this face, with his one life. There is *who he is* (Diamond 58).

The line culled from the poem by De la Mare, as Diamond later points out more explicitly (61), could be dismissed as a vacuous tautology: of course this duck is this duck, and what of it? However, to acknowledge the complex individuality of a living being or a fictional character through a similar statement implies that said individual is endowed with a specific kind of self-identity that entails a measure of dignity.

Wordsworth can imagine an elaborate narrative behind each anonymous visage that passes him in the street, and each humble duck has his network of concerns (even if





they are as facile as seeking food and mates) and entanglements, his singular *Lebenswelt*, albeit less elaborate and dense than that of a human subject.

The question of wonder, which was raised earlier, is particularly significant here. Nussbaum points to beholding an animal as an occasion for this kind of experience: “Similarly, when I see with compassion the beating of an animal, a wonder at the complex living thing itself is likely to be mixed with my compassion, and to help support it” (Nussbaum 322). The same kind of reasoning would appear to be applicable to the case of a rich, complex literary character. Just as I can behold with awe the subtle machinations of an organism, so too can I wonder at the capacity of a fictional construct to exhibit all of the multivariate complexity, the contradictory and yet manifestly synthesized attributes of a human personality—consider our meditation on Charlotte Simmons in this regard, Jim Dixon or Richard, the narrator of *The Secret History*.

The characterization in any of the object texts discussed herein is sufficiently adroit to allow for readings which sustain the tension between being repulsed by a character’s conduct on the one hand, and yet feeling compassion for him or her on the other. As a result of the fact that the machinations of the mind of the character are laid bare, it is possible to imagine similar circumstances befalling oneself. Indeed, that seems to be a distinguishing feature of adroit characterization in general. Modeling moral conduct is one of those functions of the novel that gathers much of Rorty and Nussbaum’s attention. When Rorty avers “Further, literary interest will always be



parasitic on moral interest. In particular, you cannot create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act.”(Rorty 167), he is confirming the capacity of literature to supply us with a means of trying on other “sets of sensations,” to anticipate Adamson’s remarks below. We can appreciate fictional characters as moral examples or counter-examples—at the very least, they afford us the opportunity to deliberate about what we might do in their stead. This can only help to move us to reflect on matters pertinent to the formation of both identity and character.

Indeed, a third, crucial moral category is that which includes characters of the sort for whom the best course is not always clear--even when it is, they often veer away from it quite deliberately (consider David Lurie, Angela Argo or Pheidippides in this context.)

It is by inhabiting that struggle through an effort of the imagination that the reader becomes better able to expand her repertoire of moral puzzles and acknowledge that most human beings are capable of a wide array of responses in a quandary. The linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath has conducted extensive research concerning the reception of fiction by readers at large. Her discoveries are most intriguing:

With near unanimity, Heath’s respondents described substantive works of fiction as ‘the only places where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical dimensions of life



that were elsewhere treated simplistically. From Agamemnon forward, for example, we've been having to deal with the conflict between loyalty to one's family and loyalty to the state. And strong works of fiction are what refuse to give easy answers to the conflict, to paint things as black and white, good guys versus bad guys. They're everything that pop psychology is not (Franzen, "Perchance to Dream, 11).

Nussbaum gives her assent to this analysis of the role of literary art in preserving the complexity of abiding human moral conflicts without offering easy solutions. She writes "As we have seen in discussing Sophocles, tragic stories are obsessed with the delineation of the possibilities and weaknesses of human life as such, and with the causes of the primary human difficulties. They pose delicate questions about the roles of necessity and of human weakness in constructing the plights that human beings experience" (Nussbaum 429). Nussbaum is primarily concerned with the extension of sympathy that is required of the individual who witnesses such tragic spectacles, as opposed to their didactic function. In other words, it is never a matter of bringing to bear upon tragedy the sort of crude hermeneutic that would yield the prescription "Do as Oedipus does,"—Rorty could be understood to have been too strident on that point above, implying that literary characters are *always* implicit, inky normative models—but a matter of extending sympathy to those who suffer and girding one's loins for similar confrontations with suffering.



What these strands weave together to make plain is not only the trenchancy of academic satire. They also reveal the capacity of literature of this kind to body forth characters of real thickness and dimension, that can be charlatans and hypocrites and yet, “treat each other both badly and tenderly; there’s no way to fit such three-dimensionality into the procrustean beds of victim and victimizer” (Franzen, “Perchance to Dream”, 10). Consider David Lurie in this light, or Strepsiades, or Swenson, author of *Phoenix Time*. None are models of ideal virtue but all are eminently human and therefore capable of oscillation between virtue and vice, terror and tedious prattling, patient and conscientious teaching and wanton self indulgence.

Taking up a theme similar to McEwan’s above, Don DeLillo writes:

We are rich, privileged, and strong, but they are willing to die. This is the edge they have, the fire of aggrieved belief. We live in a wide world, routinely filled with exchange of every sort, an open circuit of work, talk, family, and expressible feeling. The terrorist, planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket cart, nodding to his neighbor, lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference (DeLillo 34).

The contrast between worlds in this passage is not only useful in that it emphasizes the same clash, albeit less topical, in the foregoing excerpt. It is also something of an object lesson in employing the sort of technique of imaginative projection that is the





abiding subject of the current argument. DeLillo strives to inhabit the mind of a terrorist without obvious malice, with an apparent desire to perceive the world from a perspective that would invest otherwise alien and incomprehensible thoughts and deeds with an etiology, a pedigree. Were I such a man, the author seems to ask himself, what would my thoughts and sensations be like? How would I recite the tale of my own experience such that it would have some moral logic, some redemptive value—such that I might be understood to be a man in three dimensions? DeLillo has looked into a passing face, in the spirit of Diamond's analysis of Wordsworth, and tried to forge within his own imagination what might issue from that of another<sup>44</sup>.

Literature has the capacity to make this kind of imaginative musculature more robust. Jane Adamson invites us to contemplate the capacity in question as follows: Many literary texts highlight complexities involved in looking through different eyes, whether one's own eyes altered, or someone else's. Our language often screens these from view. We speak of 'putting myself in your shoes,' as if I remained the same old me, with different foot wear; or of 'reversing perspectives' or 'seeing it from your point of view,' as if it were basically a matter of standing on a different spot. Literature often suggests,

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<sup>44</sup> Rorty points out that this is a process that must be ongoing: "The right way to take the slogan 'we have obligations to human beings simply as such' is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can. That slogan urges us to extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past—the inclusion among 'us' of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains" (Rorty 196). It ought to be borne in mind that Rorty's only substantive quarrel with Nussbaum, here as elsewhere, consists in his claim that we make such commonalties with others real; we do not discover them as we would some religious/philosophical truth.



rather, that it is a matter of imaginatively becoming a different I: a changed self, a different character, with a different *gestalt*, other values and beliefs, another sense of reality (or what Thomas Hardy calls a different ‘structure of sensations’), and with consequent new conceptual and perceptual abilities as well (Adamson 90).

The experience of encountering a character that one would treat with disdain if he or she were present at hand in the flesh, but who manages to evoke a compassionate response when the opaque operations of the mind shift to transparency in fiction<sup>45</sup>, lends compelling support to Adamson’s position. It seems trite to assert that it broadens the mind to try on other, fictional personalities. It also seems rather glib, rather cynical to dismiss the possibility of amplifying the powers of the moral imagination through such an experience once the brute phenomenology of an exemplary case has been tasted first hand.

Nussbaum marks exactly this kind of example in the context of her discussion of empathy, which is closely allied to compassion with the caveat that it is not laden with the kind of “feeling for” circumscribed by suffering as a result of witnessing another’s plight:

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<sup>45</sup> Nussbaum points out that, “Only in fiction is the mind of another transparent. The empathetic person attempts to reconstruct the mental experience of another, and if she does this too crudely she will probably not get credit for empathy at all” (Nussbaum 328). A distinction that is important for the present argument is introduced here, in that it is possible to badly reconstruct the mental experience of another when we are interacting with corporeal human beings whose mental life is always at least partially invisible to the observer. In the case of fictional characters, we have immediate access to that mental life, which makes the issue of faulty reconstruction moot.



We often have compassion for creatures whose experience we know we can never share: most compassion with animals has this feature. And compassion for human beings from very different national or racial backgrounds frequently has this feature as well: one is aware that the other person's experience is remote, and that one can hardly begin to reconstruct it. Richard Wright wrote that in creating Bigger Thomas he had deliberately set out to repel the reader's empathy: he is a dark and alarming character, and we never feel confident that we have reconstructed his experience in our minds—although we may still have compassion for his plight (Nussbaum 330).

Thus academic satires of the caliber glossed here feature a strong amalgam of formal structure and vividness of characterization, all of which combines to facilitate the passage of the reader into that "structure of sensations" that Adams alluded to above. In turn, the ease of that transition contributes to the agility of the moral imagination of the reader, and in so doing can contribute to the immunization of his or her consciousness against dehumanizing indifference to the other as not-I. Martha Nussbaum eloquently encapsulates the political significance of the influence of literature on the moral imagination as follows:

...I believe that there is a *prima facie* and general correlation between artistic merit and the ability to engage the personality at a deep level. The fact that Sophoclean tragedy inspires compassion for human suffering and the fact that it is great and powerful poetry are not independent facts: it is the poetic



excellence that conveys compassion to the spectator, cutting through the habits of the everyday...recognizing this role of the arts has one more substantial public consequence. It means acknowledging that the arts serve a vital political function, even when their content is not expressly political—for they cultivate imaginative abilities that are central to political life (Nussbaum 433).

Measured against this standard, any of the works discussed herein may be described as having real artistic merit. If we can feel compassion for as sorry and yet as noble a collection of personalities as these figures, surely we can appreciate with renewed enthusiasm the capacity of literature to forestall the dehumanization of others that is a pre-condition for their immoral treatment. Surely we can protect what is best in the culture of the academy, by our own lights and those of these authors, and seek to remake what is not commensurate with Reading's ideal. Academic satires remind us of the strange, risible, fascinating riddle of being human; of the follies and foibles of those who seek answers to it and of the extraordinary insights that can flow from narratives that invite us to think about and in the Thinkery.





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